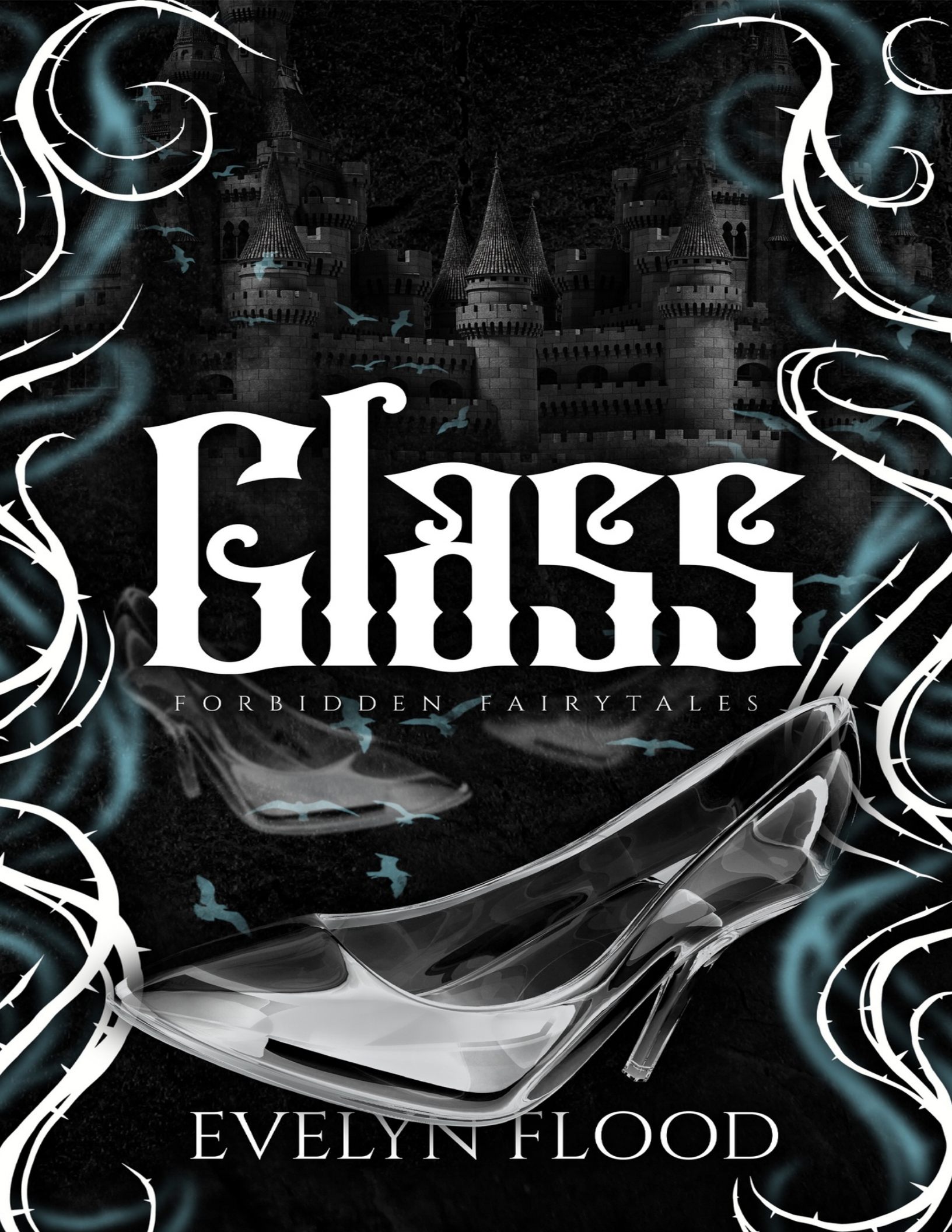
Glass
FORBIDDEN FAIRYTALES
EVELYN FLOOD

Glass

Glass
Evelyn Flood

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Content warning

Content warning

This book contains references to attempted sexual assault, cancer (brief, not main characters), modern slavery and parental abuse/neglect.

If this is okay with you, please keep reading!

Evelyn x

In loving dedication

For you.
Because we all deserve a happy ending.

1 — Stasi

"Hello there."

The rat scuttles backwards at my murmured greeting, taken aback by the presence of another in this godforsaken place. I watch as it rises up on its back feet, sniffing the air.

I pull my legs back, just in case it's as hungry as I am. But the movement startles it, and it disappears into one of the hundreds of nooks and crevices lining the four dirty stone walls that surround me.

Gone in a moment.

And with it, the only piece of entertainment I've had for days.

Sighing, I lean my head back against the slimy wall. I don't even grimace anymore. My hair is matted and wild, full of filth from the dungeon around me. Why even worry?

My stomach growls audibly, and I close my eyes.

I count to a thousand in my head.

Again.

Then I move to ten thousand.

I lose track around halfway, and start again.

I'm on the verge of trying for a hundred thousand when the sound reaches me. The soft tread of footsteps, the deferential murmurs from the guards. The sweep of soft material across the ground.

I can almost smell the adoration. It's hard not to retch.

When the key rattles in the lock on the massive, old wooden door, I don't move. I stay exactly where I am, eyes closed, leaning against this filthy wall on my filthy cot as though I have nowhere else better to be.

Sorelle really isn't the forward-thinking country we like to pretend we are. Our justice system is well and truly stuck in the Middle Ages.

Or maybe I'm just a special case.

My visitor sweeps inside. Pretty and perfect, the faintest traces of an undoubtedly extortionate perfume filling my cell. Another murmur, and the guard backs out slowly, although I can sense his reluctance.

He pulls the door closed behind him, and I wait.

"Hello, sister."

The soft words almost drip with saccharine sweetness, full of sadness and regret.

Slowly, I let my eyes open. Let them focus on her, stood in the middle of my filthy cell with her perfect, silk pink dress. I take in the elegant tiara nestled in her blonde hair; the understated diamond nestled in the hollow of her throat. Wide blue eyes regard me sorrowfully.

"Ella," I acknowledge finally. "Although I hear that they're calling you something different these days."

She dips her head, but I see the traces of a smile on her face. "The people do have quite the imagination, don't you think?"

The people. As though they're a different entity, and we have no connection to them at all. As though we weren't part of that group for our entire lives, much to Ella's disgust. At least until a few weeks ago, that is. When she got exactly what she's always wanted.

And here we are, I suppose.

"How is life as our exalted Crown Princess?" Stretching, I cross my arms in front of me. Ella turns to look around. Her lips twist in disgust as she notices the grime coating the hem of her elaborate gown.

We make quite the pair. The princess, and the prisoner.

"Wonderful," she coos. "Crispin is the perfect gentleman. It's a true fairytale ending."

My scoff rises in my throat. *Crispin*. He even *sounds* like a drip. Although what a perfect, golden couple they make. It's no wonder the entire country has fallen in love with them, I suppose. And with my sister, particularly. With her beauty, her kindness, her *courage*.

And her story, of course.

Sighing, Ella takes a step closer. "You really have brought this on yourself, you know, Anastasia."

I slide my eyes towards her incredulously. "Feel free to explain how. This, I have to hear."

She only blinks back at me, the picture of innocence. "If you and your mother hadn't treated me the way you did, we might have been sisters in truth. That's all I ever wanted; you know."

I choke on my own dry, rusty laughter, the sound dragged from my throat on a wheeze.

"Are you truly that deluded?" I force out. "Truly, Ella. Do you actually *believe* the bullshit you come out with?"

She moves closer again, until she's nearly on top of me. Her head leans down until I have to crane my own to meet her eyes.

"I don't have to," she murmurs, her lips stretching into a smile. "Because everyone *else* does, Anastasia. How does it feel, to be the most hated person in Sorelle?"

I stare back at her, stoic and silent. I watch as the mask slides away, revealing the rotten creature underneath.

There you are.

"You are alone," she croons. "Your mother is dead. You have no friends. Nobody at all who will stand and speak for you. You know, Crispin actually tried to find someone to stand as a character witness, in the interest of a *fair trial*. But not a single soul in Sorelle would stand up for you, Anastasia Cooper."

It shouldn't hurt. And I suppose it doesn't, really. Not a sharp pain at least, the way it feels when you're first injured.

No. Not a new pain. But a dull ache. A *remembered* pain.

"And why would they?" Ella laughs, her voice soft. "For such an ugly, *toxic* person. Yet the whole country would drop to its knees for *me* without even needing to ask. So, you tell me, *sister*. Which of us is telling the truth?"

"When you spend years as an indentured slave, friends become a little thin on the ground. As you should apparently know, *Cinderella*."

She grins then, delighted at her nickname. "It's wonderful, isn't it? Almost as good as yours."

The ugly stepsister.

I press my lips together, done with her. "Feel free to leave me to my imprisonment at any time. It's an improvement on the last ten years."

She laughs, the sound tinkling like bells. "Oh, no, Anastasia. That would be far too easy."

As my shoulders stiffen, she reaches down, her fingers lifting my chin. Gripping it.

"Did you know that Sorelle still maintains execution as a form of punishment?" Her words are softly spoken poison, unable to hide the delight. "Quite barbaric, really."

"And yet incredibly useful to dispose of any unwanted witnesses." Brave words, but I can barely force them through the sudden panic gripping my throat. Ella's grip on my face tightens painfully, and I reach up to grab her wrist and pry her off. "How convenient for you, *sister*."

I push her back, and my eyebrows raise as she stumbles away dramatically. Then I blink as she collapses to the floor with a wail, clutching at her wrist. The door bangs open, guards flooding inside. "My lady!"

I watch in disbelief as they carefully lift a weeping Ella from the floor. She holds her wrist carefully, her fingers covering the lack of marks as she throws me a pitiful, tear-filled glance.

"I tried," she whispers sadly. "I really did."

I have to roll my eyes. *Honestly*.

They usher her out, and I flinch as one of the men smacks his baton hard against the wall next to my head. His meaty face twists in hatred for the woman who enslaved his precious future queen.

"Bitch. You'll get what's coming to you."

None of them bother to look at the marks on my own face. At the indents left by Ella's nails in my skin.

No, they only see what they want to see.

They always do.

As the door slams behind him, the keys sliding the lock into place, I carefully rearrange myself until I can rest my head back against the wall.

And I start counting again.

2 – Silas

"Will you fucking *stop*?"

I slide Rafe an irritated glance, and he grimaces, pausing the incessant humming at last. "You know how much I hate this place."

Kit is silent beside him, but I can sense his agreement as we head up the steep steps to the gleaming white palace that towers above us in a collection of elegant towers. The jewel in the crown of Sorelle.

He despises the people inside of this place even more than Rafe does. Pampered, cooing, overblown fucking peacocks, the lot of them.

But that's exactly how we prefer it. Empty-headed. Spineless. Greedy. Ripe for manipulation.

A perfect arrangement, really. And this way, everyone gets what they want.

As we reach the ornate double doors, held open by empty-faced puppet guards on either side, we walk straight through. Nobody stops us. The guards pale, the courtiers in their puffed-up fancy outfits spinning on their heels and swiftly moving in the opposite direction.

Our reputation precedes us. Only a single footman has the courage to walk up to us. "Th-this way, my lords."

My lords. It's an honorific that doesn't belong to us. None of us are part of the court – by design, not be lack of opportunity. The royal family would gift us any title we wanted if we demanded it.

Possibly even the crown itself. After all, they wouldn't be able to hold onto it without our money propping them up.

Whilst Crispin and his frail, aging parents might have the royal blood, it's the Tate brothers who hold the royal purse strings - and every single person under this *very* expensive roof knows it. And given recent events, it's time for them to have a little reminder of exactly what happens if they try to take advantage of our…. generosity.

We stalk down the opulent hall, the ruby red carpet runner soft beneath my black leather shoes. The footman scurries ahead of us, occasionally twisting his head back to make sure we're still following. Probably hoping we're not.

Rafe stretches his lips into a wide grin as he looks back again. The man blanches, picking up speed to knock at a large set of carved double doors. He laughs softly beside me.

"The Tate brothers, Your Highness."

The scrambling from inside makes the footman glance back at us warily. Crispin clearly has company.

We wait in silence, and Rafe begins to tap his foot on the floor. I wonder if the footman will wet himself before or after he leaves us, but then a voice calls out.

The man's sigh of relief is audible as we pass him.

Crispin leans back in his chair as he watches us enter, clearly trying to give off a nonchalant vibe as he slouches to the side, one hand dangling off the arm of the chair, the other running through his hair as he yawns.

The effect of the debonair, carefree prince is somewhat ruined when Kit slides out the chair directly beside him, slipping into it. Crispin blanches, straightening abruptly as he slides mildly panicked glances towards my brother.

"The wonderful Tate brothers." Crispin smiles weakly, although his gaze keeps slipping back to Kit. My brother pulls out a knife, nonchalantly beginning a game where he splays his hand on the antique table and begins deftly stabbing into the small spaces between his fingers.

Kit has never needed to be the loudest in a room to prove his point.

Crispin swallows. "I'll admit that I'm surprised to see you here – and so… so *soon* after your last visit. What can I help you with?"

Rafe leans forward. "*Are* you surprised to see us, Crispy? Really?"

Crispin flushes at the nickname. "I *am* the Crown Prince, Rafael. At least try to act like it."

Everybody stills. The silence stretches out.

Crispin's mouth drops open. His eyes widen, and he gawks at us as if he can't believe the words that came out of his mouth. We watch as he fumbles out an apology.

Once Kit has resumed his game, I lean back in my seat. "As my brother said, *Crispin*. You didn't think that we might be paying a visit soon? I'll admit that I was very surprised to see the accounts this month. Some significant spending happening."

Spreading his hands out, Crispin looks apologetic, even as his eyes dart to the door. "Ah. Yes. You'll recall that we did discuss a small increase – ah, due to my upcoming nuptials. Such a happy occasion, after all, and as the heir to the throne, there are… expectations."

"Including from your bride to be," Rafe says drily. "Since she's rinsed every jewelry store within a fifty-mile radius. The future *Mrs Crispy* has expensive taste."

Crispin turns a little paler. "I will… speak with her. My fiancée has had quite a difficult life, as you may know, and it's taking her some time to adjust."

My fingers tap on the table. "I have no patience for, nor do I care to pander to your future wife, Your Highness."

My voice is cold, and Crispin gulps. "Well—,"

"Your repayments will need to increase to cover the shortfall. Rather substantially, I'm afraid. With interest. I fear that the royal celebrations may need to be scaled back somewhat as a result. I presume your fiancée will be fine with that? If not, she could always sell some of her new belongings. The rings alone could fund Sorelle for six months at least."

I've heard plenty about the lovely *Cinderella* and her awful upbringing. The whole country has been talking about her and her vile-sounding sister.

I wonder what the fuck she sees in Crispy. It has to be the money. He might be handsome, but the man has nothing but air between his ears. Air and pussy. At least a third of his debt is from prostitutes.

Crispin sputters. "Well, now – perhaps… um. Perhaps we can come to some sort of arrangement?"

My smile is slow, and I pull the list from my pocket, sliding it down the table. "Perhaps."

Crispin picks up the sheet, and his brows dip as he scans it. "This is… quite a lot, Silas. The money laundering regs alone – those have been in place for more than four hundred years. There will be talk—,"

He catches himself as he looks up and sees my face. "I'm sure it will be no problem."

"Excellent." My voice is smooth. "Then I believe our discussion has concluded. For today, at least."

Standing, I offer him a single nod before turning to leave. Kit stands slowly, putting his knife away as Rafe jumps up from his seat without even bothering to hide his pleasure at the brief meeting.

My eyes glance across the front pages of today's newspapers as I sweep past. They're set out as they always are, placed carefully at the end of the table in case Crispin has the sudden, unusual urge to learn a single damn thing about the country he'll apparently be running one day.

God fucking help them.

And thank fucking god for *us*.

We might make changes where we need to, to suit our own business interests, but there's more than one incident we've yanked on Crispin's strings to manage. His father

My hand is already on the gold handle of the door when I pause, something tugging at the corner of my mind. Urging me to turn around.

Rafe and Kit tense behind me as I twist. Crispin gulps audibly, but I'm not looking at him as I turn and slowly make my way back to the table.

No. My attention is firmly on the full-page photograph accompanying today's sensationalist headline.

UGLY STEPSISTER TO FACE CINDERELLA AT TRIAL

My brothers come to stand on either side of my shoulders, their eyes moving down to take in the picture.

Kit stills. I'm not sure he's even breathing.

I catch Rafe's indrawn breath, the half step back.

I wonder if they feel it too. Like they've been punched in the stomach, the air sucked out of their lungs.

She almost looks like a different person. Pale and sallow, dirty, deep circles beneath her eyes. But the shape of those eyes, those fucking catlike tawny eyes that pierced me the first time I looked into them – those eyes don't lie.

"Silas," Rafe breathes. "Do you think—,"

But I'm already flicking over the page, ignoring the hovering presence of Crispin. Searching for the information I need. Information I've been looking for, for *years*.

When all the time, she was *right fucking here,* right under our noses.

"Anastasia Cooper," I breathe. Rafe curses next to me.

Stasi.

Crispin clears his throat, flinching when we all look up. He lingers a few steps away, managing to look both curious and heinously uncomfortable as our eyes fix on him. The paper crunches under my grip as it tightens. "Yes. Anastasia. That's Ella's sister – you know."

The ugly stepsister.

I hadn't seen a photograph, not until today. That's what they've been calling her in the news - the woman who enslaved the princess, who kept Ella Cooper as an indentured servant for years, until she ran away to a ball and met the Crown Prince of Sorelle.

A real-life fairytale, one to capture the hearts of the nation.

And *Stasi* is the villain.

My jaw tightens.

That, I can believe.

Keeping the paper in my hand, I slowly pull out a chair. "Take a seat, Crispin. I have a new proposition for you. One which you'll find is in your interest to accept."

Because Crispin may be fucking clueless, but the woman currently gracing the front pages is *priceless*. There is nothing we wouldn't give, no amount we wouldn't hand over to have Anastasia back within our grasp.

To make her ours.

And to make her pay.

3 – Stasi

I'm counting in meals now.

One meal every twenty-four hours, slid through my door before it slams shut again. In between, I'm escorted to the shitty little bathroom twice a day.

The thin gruel can barely be called food, but I drink it down anyway, breaking off a tiny piece of the hard bread that accompanies it and keeping the rest to get me through the rest of the day. The bottle of water is harder to resist, but I ration it, taking small sips.

It's not enough. It's never enough.

Eleven meals.

That's how many I get before the doors open again. I'm dozing on my cot, jerked into full, terrifying awareness by the overwhelming number of men entering my cell as I scramble back, pressing myself into the wall.

The meaty-faced guard, the one who kindly smashed his baton into the wall next to me, throws down a dark bundle of cloth in front of me with a sneer. "Put that on."

I stare down at it, and then back to him. He doesn't move.

I wait, and his lips curl up in a sneer. "You're property of the crown now, bitch. You don't get to have privacy."

There's a gleam in his eye that makes nausea rise up in my stomach. I cross my arms. "Then I guess I'm not getting changed after all."

A few of the guards have the decency to shift uncomfortably. Not one of the cowards says anything, though. Meathead's face bulges, making his beady little eyes pop. "Put the fucking dress on."

I stare straight into his face. "No."

I flinch when he steps forward, but another guard gets in his way. "Parrish. We don't have time. They're already waiting for us."

The little weasel – *Parrish* - grunts in displeasure, but he storms out. The others follow. It feels like a small victory, even though he's probably watching me through the creepy little peephole they use to spy on their prisoners.

It takes me a while to struggle out of my jeans. Caked in filth and fuck knows what from my cell, they're almost solid as I wrestle with them. My shirt sticks to my skin stubbornly before I peel it away, and it lands with a thump as I pick up the new

offering and shake it out.

"Paging the fashion police," I mutter. The black dress is more of a sack, shapeless and baggy as I drag it on over my dirty underwear and let it fall past my knees. The thin material brushes against my ankles, and I slip my bare feet into the black slippers that came with it.

I raise a hand to my hair and immediately drop it. I'm not sure which is dirtier at this stage.

The door swings open, confirming my suspicion that someone was watching me through the door. "Can I have some water to wash, please?"

They ignore me, naturally.

With a guard holding each arm, my hands and ankles are chained together as though I'm some sort of high-risk psychopathic serial killer. I almost laugh at the sheer fucking insanity of it all as I'm escorted out of my cell. Moving towards fresh air for the first time in weeks, with at least half a dozen guards in front of and behind me.

When I stumble, they drag me to my feet without pausing, and I get the message.

Keep up or get dragged.

Wonderful.

I'm so focused on keeping my balance that I barely have chance to look around. We climb the narrow staircase, winding around and around until a sheer bright light pierces my eyes painfully, forcing them closed. A breeze dances across my filthy skin, and I suck the fresh, cool air into my lungs like it's the water I've been craving.

The sunlight *hurts.* Burns the back of my eyes, leaving vivid orange circles behind as tears slip out of my closed eyelids.

How long have I been in that fucking cell?

My chest feels tight as I'm forced to keep my eyes closed.

This could be the last bit of daylight you ever see, Stasi. Open your damn eyes.

The thought is sobering, and I crack my lids open the barest amount to try and look. A van is waiting up ahead, white with blacked-out windows. The guards lift me into the back, shoving me down onto a bench as they take up seats around me.

My eyes open fully in the muted light, and I lean my head back, listening to the mutters of the guards as an engine rumbles to life beneath us.

They speak as though I'm not sat right here, listening to them gloat over the possibility of my death.

Deep breath.

In, out.

It helps a little, helps to dampen the fear filling my lungs, threatening to choke the air from my throat.

If today is the last day I have, I refuse to give them the satisfaction of watching me break. Not when I've held myself together in carefully crafted pieces for so long.

Courage, Anastasia.

We drive for a while before the van slows. I keep my breathing steady as something bangs heavily into the side, and the guards stiffen.

Another bang, and another.

The van slows to a crawl, and a voice calls through. "We have a crowd."

A crowd. A baying mass of faceless people, all gathered to watch me fall, to gloat in the downfall of the *ugly stepsister*.

It shouldn't sting, not when there are much bigger problems for me to focus on. It's not the first time I've been called that, after all.

As ugly on the inside as you are on the outside.

I wonder what *they* would say, if they could see me now. If they've spoken about me, gloated at the downfall of the girl they once knew, watched the twisted, misshapen saga of my life being played out across every newspaper in the country.

I wonder if they ever even think of me at all. When I've barely gone a day without thinking of them.

Stop it, Stasi. Breathe.

I can hear the shouts now, the taunts. More hands bang against the sides of the vehicle, almost rocking it, jeers and shouts aimed in my direction.

And they call me ugly. Some of these people need to look in the damn mirror.

When the van stops, even the guards hesitate, sharing glances between each other as though debating who has the pleasure of going first.

I'm pulled to my feet. None of them look at me. Not one of them spare me a single word as the doors are pulled open.

The whole world narrows.

Flashes, shouts, screams.

Anger. *Hatred*.

Such pulsating, vibrant hatred that I can almost taste it, sour and prickly on my tongue as the guards drag me out, making a show of it, much to the delight of the crowd. They push against the makeshift barriers someone thought to put up, screaming in my face, shrieking insults and vitriol as I'm pulled along towards the palace. It feels like it's miles away, and I wonder if

they've done it deliberately. More of a spectacle.

I let them do it, let them almost drag me, unable to see beyond the twisted faces surrounding me.

This is so much worse than what I imagined.

A grunt escapes my throat as something hits my face, hard. The guards pause, scanning the area, and I stare down at the apple core on the ground.

Another hit connects with my cheekbone, and my head whips to the side. I suck in a breath at the spike of pain.

More follows. I wait to see if the guards will do something, anything, but they just look ahead, prodding me along.

No, I realize, glancing around.

They're falling back, shoving me ahead of them with harsh hands, leaving just enough space for the public to have full access. Protecting themselves or throwing me to the wolves, it's the same thing.

And the people screaming in my face take full advantage.

I lose track of the number of items that hit me as we walk towards the palace. People are pressed against the barriers all the way up the steep flight of white stone steps, shouting and laughing as I'm splattered with rotten fruit and vegetables.

I keep my head down, refusing to give them the satisfaction of a response, even as my ears ring and stinging slaps ring out against my skin. It's only when something smashes against my forehead that I stagger, and the guards finally decide to step in.

They lift me up the last few steps as I shake my head, trying to get rid of the fuzziness. The ornate entrance doors are opened for us, and they pull me through, the sounds of the crowd dying away behind us as someone pushes them shut.

I don't get a second to pull myself together. They pick up the pace, yanking me forward, dragging me down a hallway filled with huge pieces of art in gilded golden frames. Members of the royal family stare down at me in silent judgement, and I almost laugh when I catch sight of Ella's perfect face amongst them. Prim and delicate, seated on a throne next to Crispin.

Jesus. She works fast, considering they're not even married yet.

I'm expecting a courtroom. Maybe a judge, a jury. But instead, I'm dragged into a long, high-ceilinged room, as ornate and overdone as the rest of this fucking place.

There is no judge. No jury to be seen.

No. Instead, my sister and her fiancée sit in matching thrones at the end of the room. Watching me as I'm escorted towards them. Rows of courtiers line the walls, every one of them ridiculously overdressed, whispering and giggling to themselves as I'm paraded past them.

At least none of this lot seem to have any rotten fruit at hand. Their eyes flick over me with distaste, lips curling back in disgust as they murmur about my hair, the sack of a dress I'm wearing.

One loud woman complains about the smell. My whole face heats in response, humiliation prickling the back of my neck.

But everyone silences as we reach the end of the room, and I'm pushed down onto my knees. They hit the stone floor solidly, and I bite back a wince as I shuffle in place before looking up.

Prince Crispin stares down at me. Broad shouldered, he slouches in his throne, tapping his fingers on the arm as he looks me up and down. Slack-jawed with morbid fascination, as though I'm a creature he's just discovered on the bottom of his shoe. Next to him, Ella is the picture of devastation. Tears fill her eyes as she watches me, and when I stare back, she bites her lip and presses the back of her palm over her mouth as though the sight of me here on my knees is far too much for *her* to possibly be expected to bear.

I wait. Everyone waits, as the Crown Prince of Sorelle continues his staring.

After a minute, Ella slides her eyes towards her fiancée. She coughs, delicately, and he straightens in his seat, reaching out for her hand. She clasps it in both of hers, and he raises it to his mouth, pressing his lips against it. The crowd murmurs in approval.

When he's finished with his little show, he sits back, keeping Ella's hand clasped in his. "Anastasia Cooper."

I steel myself.

"You have been brought before the Royal Court to answer to the modern slavery charges levelled against you. This court states that over a period of four years, you and your mother, Angelica Cooper – now deceased - held Ella Cooper against her will and forced her to act as an indentured servant, without pay."

The crowd murmurs in disgust.

"You stole her identity documentation and used intimidation and threats to keep her in your home, where you benefitted from her unpaid labor. The court also ascertains that you assaulted Ella Cooper on several occasions, resulting in her fearing for her life. You forced her to sleep on a stone floor and withheld food as a punishment on frequent occasions."

Crispin frowns. "Your ruse was only discovered upon the death of your mother, whereupon Ella was able to escape from your home and seek refuge under the protection of the royal family."

I lick my dry lips. "I—,"

"You have not been given permission to speak."

The prince is enjoying this show. He straightens more with every sentence, every inch the golden knight fighting for his princess. Ella watches him with adoration, even as she casts small, sad glances my way.

He taps the fingers of his hand against the armrest of the throne he sits in. “This case involves the Royal family. Therefore, we have the right to intercede and enforce punishment, as per the laws of Sorelle. I will be announcing your sentence today.”

I feel cold. “But—,”

“Silence,” he hisses. “In the interest of fairness, the court searched for a character witness to stand for you. We found no-one. Your sister has already given evidence, which has been accepted by this court. Anastasia Cooper, you have been judged. And this court finds you guilty.”

I didn’t expect anything less. Certainly not a fair hearing. But the fucking injustice *burns*. “May I at least speak in my own defense?”

“You already have,” he says tightly. “We have the statements you provided upon your arrest. Your story has been proven false. There is no evidence to support your fanciful accusations. I have no wish to subject my fiancée to hearing them again.”

No evidence. Nothing, not even a scrap to support my version of events. My deceitful little stepsister was *very* thorough in her plan.

“Before I pass down your sentence,” Crispin continues. “I will give you *one* opportunity. And you only have this because of the kindness of the woman sitting next to me. Take it, and I may consider a lighter sentence.”

Ella leans forward, offering me a wobbly smile. Her eyes are shiny, gleaming with unshed tears.

Well, this should be good.

“Anastasia,” she breathes. “We are sisters. To see you here brings me no pleasure.”

Liar.

“All I want,” she says tearfully, “is an apology, Stasi. Admit what you’ve done and apologize. I beg you to do this for me. And for yourself. *Please*.”

Whispers sweep the room. Admiring whispers. How *kind* my sister is, to offer me this. After everything I’ve done.

The injustice sticks in my throat, drying it, even as we watch each other.

“You have one chance.” Prince Crispin’s voice is hard. “I suggest you do not waste it.”

Wetting my lips, I open my mouth. Ella watches me avidly, her eyes gleaming with something more than tears. Satisfaction.

He’s right. And I have no intention of wasting it.

“I…,” my voice cracks as she leans forward, her head tilting to the side. I cough, trying to clear my throat enough for them to hear me.

For everyone in the room to hear me as I lift my head up.

“I’m sorry,” I say slowly. Truthfully.

Ella’s eyes light up.

“For all of you,” I continue.

I turn around to face the court, away from the widening eyes of my so-called stepsister. “For being taken in so damn *easily*.”

I spin back to Ella. She’s gaping at me, the tears vanishing. “And I am truly sorry,” I call out, my voice steady and sure. “To have ever had someone as manipulative and psychotic as you in my life. My crazy, deluded, lying *bitch* of a stepsister.”

“That’s enough,” Crispin chokes out, but I’m not done.

If I only have one opportunity, I’m making the fucking most of it.

“One day,” I say to him loudly, “you will realize who she truly is. And even if I’m not here to see it, I hope that it bites you in the *fucking* ass.”

The room erupts. Ella collapses back into her seat and Crispin leans over her, fanning her face frantically. “Sweetheart. Can you hear me?”

I’m surrounded by idiots. Ella, clearly faking her little fainting fit, begins to cry as Crispin roars for silence.

I don’t believe for a minute that he would have given me an easier sentence.

“You wanted to see me on my knees,” I throw at her as she sits up. “But I will see you in hell before I ever beg you for a single fucking thing, *sister*.”

Fuck, it feels good to see the look on her face. The embarrassment, as she glances around the room.

I’m not playing into her games for a second longer. Even if it’s probably the stupidest thing I’ve ever done.

I take a breath, staying silent as Crispin finally gets the room under control, everyone settling in to listen avidly to what he has to say in response.

“You dare to throw this back in our faces,” he says finally. His voice shakes as he clears his throat. “Very well. I have made my decision.”

I wait. I don’t know much about the execution laws in Sorelle. They don’t take place often, and normally behind closed doors.

I hope they make it quick.

“In the interest of my fiancée,” Crispin says finally, “I will *not* be sentencing you to death, although I doubt anyone here would dispute it if I did.”

Ella twists her head to stare at him. “What?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. Imprisonment isn't much better, in my opinion. Not with Parrish in there with me.

He leans over to pat her hand, but he doesn't respond before he turns back to me. Ella faces me too, a scowl spreading over her face that I can see her fighting to wipe away.

"However," he continues. "Punishment must be severe. And so I sentence you, Anastasia Cooper, to twenty years of imprisonment."

The words hit me like a sledgehammer, and I sway.

Twenty *years*.

Two decades of my life. I'll be forty-five when I'm released. If I even make it that far.

"Your sentence will be served under house arrest."

My head jerks up. *House arrest?*

At this point, I'm certain Ella and I have matching looks of confusion on our faces, as Crispin leans forward. "You will serve out your sentence away from the public eye, under the close watch of three of my most… *trusted* men. You will receive the same treatment that you gave to your sister, and you will work to earn your keep at Oakbourne Manor."

Wait.

Oakbourne Manor.

The thrones in front of me swim hazily as a wave of cold sweeps over my skin, leaving numbness in its wake.

It's not possible.

It can't be.

Because that would mean—

"The Tate brothers," Crispin announces, "will act as your keepers for the duration of your sentence."

There's a roaring in my ears as footsteps sound behind me. My eyes close as I fight to stay upright, to push away the dizziness threatening to send me toppling to the floor. It feels as though all of the air in the room has been sucked away, and it's because of the three men who come to stand around me, their eyes on my face.

I can *feel* them, feel their stares like a brand on my skin.

And I know, then. Know that it's them.

Because only three people have ever made me feel that way.

Just for a moment, hope trickles in.

Crispin said they couldn't find a character witness.

But *they're* here. They *came*. So maybe, just maybe…

Slowly, I open my eyes.

It takes me a few seconds for the awareness to sink in. For me to realize that these are not the boys I once knew.

And that small, final, precious piece of hope fizzles out.

Of course. Why did you think they would be any different, Anastasia?

Kit's shoulders are broader now, even as he folds his arms, watching me silently with those unique violet eyes that feel ice cold as they bore into me. His hair brushes over his forehead in a slight curl, a raven's wing of blue-black.

I can barely breathe. Kit. Kit is *here*, and if Kit is here, then that means—

My eyes move to his twin. Identical in their facial features, yet as different as night and day. His shoulder-length wavy caramel blonde hair falls carelessly over his face, strands coming free from the cord he uses to keep it tied back. The sight of them together still makes me catch my breath. Rafe's breathing is almost as staggered as mine, the anger in his face, in his hooded green eyes clear. If Kit is ice, then Rafe is fire, the hate in his gaze heating my skin.

I have to take a second before I can face Silas. If the twins can look at me like that, then Silas might well kill me on the spot. I push down the memories of our last meeting as I turn to him slowly. My eyes slide up… and up.

The oldest Tate brother is even bigger than I remember. He was tall then, but now he outflanks even the twins, matched only in the width of his shoulders and torso.

He looks like he could break me. Especially as he clenches his fists, my eyes trailing from the movement to his face. Deep, indigo blue stares back at me. His hair is sleek and dark, shorter than the twins. More controlled, just like the man who watches me with a hate-filled gaze.

Exactly as I last saw him.

"Hello, Anastasia," he murmurs. "Long time, no *see*."

There is not enough air. They've stolen it all, every scrap of oxygen as my hand reaches for my throat.

And then my head meets the stone floor, and they're gone.

4 — Stasi — ten years ago

"Really, Anastasia. There's no need to look so glum."

My mother sits across from me. Angelica Westin looks perfectly at home here, her heeled ankles crossed elegantly as she sips from a glass of champagne, courtesy of the mini refrigerator built into the limousine sent to bring us to our new home. The silk blue dress she's wearing looks expensive. I haven't seen her wearing it before.

Not Angelica Westin anymore, I remind myself.

And I am no longer Anastasia Westin.

No. At the moment, I'm an Ellis. I think.

Or maybe a Green.

I lost count a while back.

I'm about to ask my mother, but she's frowning at me, so I close my mouth abruptly. "This is a happy day, you know. You could at least look grateful. It was very kind of William to send this car for us."

Ah, yes. *William*. The new flavor of the month.

I wonder how long this one will last. I hope he's nicer than the last one. Edward was ruddy-faced and merry. At least until he'd had a few drinks. Then his fists did the talking.

We didn't stay there long. And now we're making our way through endless winding green fields, through gently weaving yellow miles of corn and orchards that look perfect for climbing. At least the scenery is pretty.

"How will I get to school?" I blurt out. Another new school. Something else I've lost count of. My mother only rolls her eyes.

"William has a tutor that attends the house. Easier all around."

"He hired a tutor for me?" I ask with a frown. It seems… excessive.

My mother shifts a little, the only sign of discomfort she allows herself. I narrow my eyes. "Mother."

She sniffs. "He has sons, I believe. Three."

I stare at her. "*Three* sons? How old?"

She waves a hand. "Around your age. One is a little older, I think. It will be nice for you to have siblings."

I let my head thump against the side of the car. *Excellent.*

I don't want fake brothers, or a tutor. I want stability, and a proper school. I want a *home.*

None of that is in the cards for me. Not as long as my mother is in charge. But that won't be forever. As soon as I'm old enough, I'm taking out every loan I can and heading to the first college in Sorelle that accepts me.

Freedom.

But in the meantime, I'm left to trudge along in the wake of my mother's many broken relationships.

She straightens in her seat, a smile spreading across her face. "Well, now. This will do nicely, I think."

Turning, I stare morosely out of the window. And my eyes widen.

The house rises up in front of our eyes as we head down the hill. Not a house. A mansion. Red bricks cover several stories, broken only by large, beautiful glass windows. Ivory pillars prop up a balcony that runs the length of the house on the second floor, ivy winding around them prettily.

"Are you sure this is it?" It looks like a school. Or a hotel.

"Oakbourne Manor," my mother breathes. "William did say it was on the large side."

That's an understatement. But we're already pulling up, and I catch sight of the people waiting outside.

Four of them. An older man paces in front of the younger three. It looks as though he's lecturing them. They all have their arms crossed, mutinous expressions on their faces as they turn towards us, and I shrink back instinctively. "Mother. I don't think —,"

"You never do think," my mother shoots back. "This is about our future, Anastasia. William is a good man. And a rich one. So smile, and be polite. Understand?"

I bite the inside of my cheek heavily. "Understood."

I know the rules. I've played this part before, more times than I can count. So I climb out behind my mother, carefully smoothing out the creases in the new green-checked dress she gave me to wear this morning. My shoes pinch at my toes, black and shiny and new as I stand there awkwardly and wait.

My mother throws herself at the man I'm assuming – hoping – is William with a delighted squeal that hurts my eardrums. "Darling! I missed you so much."

He lets out a bright, delighted laugh as he swings her around. "I missed you too, Angelica. I'm so happy you're here."

I freeze as he looks over her shoulder. He's a handsome man, wavy blonde hair and deep blue eyes with laughter creases in the corners. He grins at me. "You must be Anastasia. It's a pleasure to meet you, sweetheart."

He sounds genuine, and my muscles unlock slightly. "Thank you, Mr Tate."

He throws back his head in a laugh. "Please, call me Will, or William," he says in a begging tone. "Mr Tate makes me feel awfully old."

My mother slaps his chest playfully. "Nonsense. You're not old at all."

He grimaces. "Tell that to my wrinkles."

His self-deprecating tone threatens to draw a smile, and he points at me. "Ah! I see it. Let it go, Anastasia. I promise we're a smile-friendly household."

He's so… friendly. I can't help it. I smile at him, and he grins back at me. "There we go. I know it's awkward, meeting new people. But we don't bite, I promise. Why don't you come and meet my sons?"

Hesitantly, I shuffle forwards. My mother is already embracing them, one after the other, each hug looking more awkward than the last. The boy on the end actually steps back to get away from her, only acquiescing when William clears his throat.

"So, Anastasia," he says brightly. His hand rests gently on my shoulder as he points. "These are my twins, Kit and Rafe. Yes, they are identical, but we somehow managed to end up with two different hair and eye colors. One of those genetic quirks, but I've always been able to tell them apart because of it, so I can't complain. They're only two years older than you. You're fifteen, am I right?"

I nod, taking them in. It's… strange. Their faces truly are identical, down to the dimple. But one is dark, one blonde. One pair of violet eyes, one pair of deep green. Only the blonde has a slight crook in his nose, as though it's been broken and reset. They both stare at me.

"Hello," I whisper. They mumble greetings back, and William points me towards the older boy.

"This is my eldest," he says proudly. "Silas."

Deep blue eyes regard me warily, before he dips his head in a brief greeting. "Welcome to our home, Anastasia."

His voice sounds stilted, but I try to smile anyway. "Thank you."

William squeezes my shoulder again, gently nudging me towards the house. "Excellent. Come on inside, and we'll give you a tour. I picked out a bedroom I thought you'd like, but there's a few for you to choose from if you'd prefer, and we'll get it set up."

He pauses, and I look up at him.

"I hope you'll feel at home here, Anastasia," he says gently. "Truly. I care very much for your mother, and I hope you know that includes you, too."

That's… more than anyone else has ever given me. My smile feels wobbly, but he nods in understanding as he leads me

towards the house, my mother on his other side.

I twist my head back to look over my shoulder.

But the gravel courtyard is empty.

5 – Kit

Rafe curses next to me as Anastasia crumples. None of us are fast enough to catch her as her head smacks into the solid stone floor, as her eyes close.

The room around us is abuzz. Every pair of eyes is focused on us, watching us with *her*.

So I step forward, casually leaning down to press my fingers against the warm skin of her neck. A throbbing meets my fingers, the steady sound of her pulse pushing down the roaring in my ears. I turn back to Rafe and Silas. "Pulse is fine. She'll need her head checked when she wakes up."

It's an effort to step away from her, to leave her crumpled on the floor. Silas regards her silently for a moment before he turns to Crispin. "I assume we can take her now?"

Crispin blinks, his eyes flicking between us and the unconscious girl on the floor. "Oh – uh. Yes. I don't see why not."

My eyes flick to his choice of life partner. Ella Cooper isn't paying attention to Stasi at all. Nor to her fiancé. She's watching us, her eyes travelling over Silas, moving on to Rafe and then to me.

When our eyes meet, she offers me a soft, sweet smile. Then she bites her lip, her gaze flicking down to Anastasia. "Will she… will she be okay?"

She looks to me for an answer, but Rafe interjects. "Fine, Your Highness. Just a bump. You won't have to worry about her anymore."

She nods, slowly. "Yes. Because of… the house arrest."

Her brow furrows, and she glances between us and Crispin in silent question.

"Indeed." Silas's voice is tight. "If you'll excuse us, we need to get going."

Ella regards us silently. "I see. Take care of my sister… *gentlemen*."

I wonder what she sees when she looks at us. She looks down at her sister. "Try not to make it too difficult on her."

Her tone suggests the opposite. It's Rafe who responds, his voice cold. "The punishment will be fitting."

And I see the way her lip curls. "I understand. I wish things were different."

She doesn't understand anything. But we turn our backs on them as Anastasia begins to stir. Her hand reaches for her head, and I glance over her auburn hair, matted and dull. Almost unrecognizable.

Yet this is definitely the Stasi we know. Her eyes blink open, hazy and unfocused as Rafe leans down. "Get up, Anastasia."

Her eyes open further at his snapped command, awareness slow to seep back in as she shakes her head and then winces. "You're… really here."

She sounds out of it, and I glance at Silas. Jaw tight, he reaches down and grabs her arm, pulling her to her feet as she lurches. "Stay upright, or we'll drag you."

"No change there," she mutters drowsily. But she takes a breath, her eyes clearing even as she clenches her jaw. She pushes herself away from Silas. His hands twist into fists as he steps back, leaving her to manage herself.

She glances around at us, not bothering to look back at the royal couple. "You want me to walk, then lead the way. I have no idea where I'm going."

Nobody else would see the hesitation in Silas's frame. The way he flexes his hands, as though shoving down the urge to reach for her.

But he turns away, brushing past me. "Bring her."

Rafe and I flank her as she shuffles forward. Small, wobbly steps hampered by the chains between her ankles. She doesn't look at us. She just pushes forward, walking past the silent crowd with as much dignity as she can muster.

She has more than she knows.

We walk out of the room, the doors closing behind us.

Slowly, steadily, we move closer to the main palace doors. And the closer we get, the more Anastasia drags her feet. She stares straight ahead, and I glance down at the small, darkening marks on her face, courtesy of the baying mob on the way in. "That won't happen again."

The words slip out, and Rafe frowns at me over the top of her head. She laughs, although it's more of a croak. "I don't think even you can control that group."

I consider the options. Assess how fast we might be able to move.

The chains on her ankles clink as if in response. I press my lips together.

Silas is already through, holding his hand up to us in a silent request, and we wait behind the doors as he barks orders. It takes a few minutes before his fist bangs on the wood in a signal. "Time to go."

My fingers brush Stasi's arm as I move to wrap my hand around her arm. But she flinches away from me.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

My tone comes out more irritated than I intended. She stands still as I steady her. "Not yet, you mean. Not until we're behind closed doors, right?"

She sounds resigned.

Rafe clicks his tongue in annoyance. "Hurry up."

I wait to see what she'll do. If she'll try to shrink away, try to get out of walking through those doors.

But Stasi has never acted the way we'd expect. So I shouldn't be surprised when she throws her shoulders back, lifting her head up.

"Open them."

It's not a request. It's a fucking demand.

The men waiting on either side look to us for confirmation, and Rafe nods.

She doesn't wait for us. She walks straight through with her head held high, the chains forcing her to limit her steps to a shuffle rather than a strut.

It doesn't matter. Even through the filth, she still holds herself like a damn queen. Rafe and I watch her like fools, belatedly jumping to catch up with her once she's through.

But the crowds have disappeared. Silas appears next to me, his eyes on Stasi. "We spread word that she was coming out of another entrance. But we don't have long."

She doesn't give a sign that she's heard us. She just keeps walking, heading straight towards the black car that sits at the end of the barriers, engine idling.

"Ours, I presume?"

Her voice is tight, and Rafe moves forward to open the door. He bows, mockingly. "After you."

She can't lift her feet enough to climb in, hampered by her chains. Silas slaps his arm against my chest when I go to help in a silent order.

Wait.

The seconds tick on as we watch her struggle. She tries to lift one ankle, then the other, testing the give. There isn't any. Even her wrists are tied.

When Rafe snorts, she loses her temper. "Will we stand here all day, or do you plan on actually helping?"

Silas straightens. "That depends on how nicely you ask us."

She turns, her voice icy. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." He saunters up to her. "We own you now, Anastasia. Twenty years. And you will need to speak to us accordingly. Very, *very* nicely."

I can almost see the glint of hellfire in her eyes. “Fine. Help me, please.”

Silas leans in, and his teeth flash. “I think you mean ‘help me, please, *Sir*.’”

Her head jerks back. “Like *fuck* am I calling you Sir, Silas.”

“Language,” Silas murmurs. “I see we have a lot of work to do, Anastasia. But we’re not going anywhere until you prove you can obey directions.”

There’s a shout from behind us. Stasi’s eyes flicker.

“And the crowd is heading this way,” Silas says, his tone bored. “So, what will it be?”

“Fine,” she grits out. “Help me. Please. *Sir*.”

“There,” he says coldly. “Was that so hard?”

He lifts her in before she can respond, but we all catch the hissed curse that echoes out. Silas turns back to us, raising an eyebrow at the looks on our faces. “What?”

Shaking my head, I push past him and climb inside, settling next to a silently seething Anastasia. Rafe slides in from the other side, Silas getting into the driver’s seat.

The door closes, and it feels like I can breathe for the first time in days.

Or maybe for the first time in ten years.

Because she’s finally here.

And she’s ours.

6 — Stasi

Cool fingers grip my face, yanking me out of my doze. "Wake up."

Groaning, I try and slap away the hand. My head aches. My whole damn *body* aches.

I just need to sleep.

My arm is caught, and I try and tug it free.

"Anastasia."

The snapped sound of my name drags me back into wakefulness, and my eyes slide open. A pair of green eyes swim into view. "You might have a concussion."

I don't have a concussion. I just need to rest my eyes. Turning away, I bury my face into the warm material. When it pulls away, I finally open my eyes properly.

Kit stares down at me, his violet eyes devoid of emotion. "Please remove your face from my jacket."

My face burns with mortification as I pull it back, and I glance around. Night has fallen, and I wonder how long they actually let me sleep before waking me up. The city is a few hours away from Oakbourne.

"We'll be there in five minutes."

I turn to Rafe, but he's staring out of the window.

It feels strange, to be back between them again. I never knew that something so familiar, as familiar to me as breathing, could feel so… unsettled.

Broken.

And yet here we are. The men on either side of me both turn away, leaving me to my own thoughts as I try to scrape them back together around the pulsing headache at the back of my skull.

Maybe I do have a concussion. I'm struggling to process today's events, to wrap my head around the fact that I'm back with the Tate brothers. That they're taking me back to Oakbourne Manor, a house I haven't set foot in for nine years.

But where I'll apparently be spending the next twenty… as a *servant*.

My breathing starts to speed up. *Don't think about it.*

I can't think about how much of my life has been taken from me today. How much Ella has stolen from me, on top of the years she's already had.

I wonder how much more these three men could possibly take, without there being nothing left of me at all.

And how long it will be before I find out.

When the car rolls to a stop and Kit and Rafe finally look down at me, the shaking in my fingers has softened to a tremor. I ball my hands into fists, waiting.

The car door opens, and Silas appears, his broad shoulders filling the doorway easily as he ducks down to meet my eyes. "Time to meet your sentence, Anastasia *Cooper*."

There's disgust in his voice, even as his large hands wrap around my waist, lifting me down from the car. He steps back as I look up at the familiar view. It hasn't changed.

I almost expect William to come charging out, bouncing and grinning.

My mouth feels dry. I didn't even think about their father. "Is… is he here? William?"

The tension around me ratchets up tenfold. Silas grips my shoulder, leaning into my face.

"Don't you *ever*," he snarls, "say his name in my presence again. You don't even get to think about him. Do you understand?"

I blink. "I—,"

He shakes me, the movement making my already aching head throb more. "No, he's not fucking here. And if you want someone to blame, *try looking in the fucking mirror*."

I flinch back, away from the tight grip of his hands and the hate in his eyes, and Silas drops me as though my skin is on fire. He turns and walks away from me, rapid footsteps towards the lights of the house.

"Sort her out," he snaps over his shoulder as he pushes the door open and disappears inside.

Slowly, I reach up my hand as best I can to try and massage the aching flesh. There's nothing I can do for the hurt inside my chest, though.

"What did he mean?" I whisper, turning to Kit. Then to Rafe. Both of them wear identical harsh expressions, never more alike than they seem to be right now, in their renewed dislike for me. As though I've reminded them of something. "What… what happened?"

Rafe's jaw tightens, his mouth forming a firm line. "The fuck did Silas just say?"

I look between them. Both of them look determined to blame me for something, but I have no idea *what*.

Unless it's for what happened the night I left. But something about William, specifically, has triggered them.

As… as though he's not here anymore.

My heart hurts even more at the thought. I don't protest when Rafe grabs my arm, dragging me after Silas. I try to keep up, Kit falling in behind us as he pulls me roughly up the steps, shoving the door open with one hand and pushing me through with the other.

The entrance hall hasn't changed at all. Small sets of stairs around us lead off to various places. William's study. The longer hall ahead of us, leading upstairs. Another set to our left would take us down to the kitchen.

The room is still the same dark green, full of artwork and vases filled with fresh flowers from the fields around us. I wonder who keeps them filled. I can't imagine Silas, Kit or Rafe picking daisies.

We both come to a stop. The woman waiting inside the hall isn't someone I know. Short and gray-haired, she eyes Rafe with the expression of a mildly displeased headmistress.

"Ellen," Rafe acknowledges. "You didn't have to wait up."

Her pale-blue eyes move to mine. "I was up anyway. It's no bother. This is her?"

Her expression is carefully neutral, but I catch a flicker of distaste in her eyes before she blinks it away. When Rafe doesn't respond, she nods. "I've prepared you a room."

She speaks directly to me, and I nearly close my eyes in relief at the thought of a bed. But Rafe's grip tightens. "She doesn't need a room."

We both turn to him, and even Ellen looks a little taken aback. "Why not?"

"Because," he says grimly, "she's not here for a holiday."

He pulls me past a gaping Ellen, yanking open the door to the kitchen and pulling me down the small flight of stairs. I barely have chance to glance around before he's pushing me towards the hearth. "This is appropriate, don't you think? Since it's where you made your sister sleep. An eye for an eye, and all that."

I stare at the filthy stone floor. My eyes start to prickle, and I blink them back. "It wasn't like that."

"As though I would believe a word that comes from your lying lips," he says, almost softly. "Enjoy your accommodations, Anastasia. Ellen will wake you in the morning. *Early*."

My eyes drop to my hands. To the chains. To the filth beneath my fingernails. The dirt caking my skin. "Wait – Rafe, *please* —,"

But he's already jumped up the stairs, the door slamming closed behind him. I'm left with the smoldering remains of the hearth, glowing embers that fade the longer I stare into them.

When they start to swim, I blink. Moisture drips onto my cheek.

"Stop it," I whisper. "Pull yourself together, Stasi."

I need running water. And a bathroom. One more urgently than the other.

Thankfully, there's a small washroom at the other end of the kitchen. It was used by the staff when they came in from the gardens… before. I make my way over to it, praying it hasn't changed, and sigh with relief when I find it exactly the same as I remember.

Everything seems unchanged. As though I only stepped out of the front door yesterday, and not a decade ago. The art on the walls is the same. The little hooks on the back of the bathroom door are unchanged. Even the towels seem familiar, if not a little more worn.

Switching on the light, I brace myself before looking in the tiny circular mirror.

I didn't brace enough.

I don't recognize myself at all. My face looks gaunt, the skin stretched over my cheekbones, so sharp they could cut glass. And my eyes. Dull, sunken, the circles beneath a deep, dark purple. My lips look chapped and blistered, worn away from worrying at them with my teeth.

And my hair… I'll be lucky to save any of it. My fingers prod uselessly at the nest.

"It doesn't matter," I mutter to myself. "It's just *hair*."

But my voice breaks anyway.

Swallowing hard, I glance down at the faucet. At least I have access to warm water. Better than nothing.

I spend a good hour scrubbing myself as best I can in the small space, working around the restrictions of the chains to try and get as much of the dirt off as possible.

I'd *kill* for a fucking toothbrush. They'll have to give me one eventually. I hope. I can only imagine what my breath smells like right now.

When I finally wander back into the kitchen, damp and shivering but a little cleaner than I was, it's a relief to stand next to the hearth. I take in the solid floor with a grimace. The exhaustion is starting to weigh heavily on my shoulders, the pounding pain in my head getting worse.

I have to sleep, or my body is going to force the issue. So I settle myself down with a groan, wriggling to try and find anything like a softer part of the gray stone beneath me and failing miserably.

Rolling onto my back, I blow out a breath and stare at the ceiling. There's a small blotch directly above me that looks remarkably like a cat.

It's weirdly reassuring. Like I'm not quite as alone as I currently feel.

"It could be worse, right?" I say to it out loud. "I could be dead."

Although… I'm not one hundred per cent convinced that this is the better option. Not when I have no idea what Silas, Kit and Rafe have in store for me.

But that's definitely a tomorrow problem.

7 – Rafe

I jump up the last of the steps, coming to a stop when I see Silas speaking to Ellen in the hall. My twin turns to me, his arms crossed. Kit doesn't look amused. "You left her in the kitchen?"

I half-shrug. "That's what we agreed. Right?"

He presses his lips together before he nods, turning back to where Silas is giving further instructions to Ellen. Her brows rise higher with every statement. "Don't you think this is all a little… excessive?"

I clear my throat. "She's here, instead of rotting away in a prison cell. So I'd say that's a bonus, Ellen."

Silas nods in agreement. He still looks angry, that crease between his eyes on full display as he looks down at our petite housekeeper. "I expect the rules to be followed, Ellen. Don't challenge me on this. No exceptions."

Ellen is probably one of the only people who could challenge him and get away with it, but she hasn't been managing our home for so long without understanding when to push, and when to leave things the hell alone. She looks grim, but she nods. "I understand. Is she… does she need anything this evening?"

I shake my head. "Leave her be until tomorrow."

Ellen hesitates. "The chains—,"

"Stay on," Silas says shortly. "For now, at least. Anastasia needs a reminder that this will be nothing like her last stay in this house."

We can't leave her chained forever, of course. But a day or two – just to remind her of her place here – no, that won't hurt.

I push away the pleading look on her face as I left her.

She deserves this, I remind myself. *She deserves all of this, and more besides.*

Ellen nods, but she still doesn't look happy. "There's no bedding down there."

Kit shifts next to me, and I wonder if my twin agrees with the subtle criticism in her voice.

"She made her sister sleep on solid stone for *years*, Ellen." Silas's voice is harsh. "A few days isn't going to kill her. She wants comfort, she needs to work for it."

Starting first thing tomorrow. Our new house guest is in for a rude awakening.

Kit abruptly turns, and I stare after him as he disappears down the hall towards his music room. Silas hesitates, half turning as if to follow before he thinks better of it. "I'm heading up. Ellen, you should get some rest."

Once she's gone, he turns to me. My older brother looks tired. "You should get some sleep too. Who the hell knows what tomorrow will look like."

Our first full day with Anastasia. Not that she'll see much of us as she starts to serve out her *sentence*.

Twenty years.

I shake my head as Silas watches me. "I'll be up soon."

He doesn't argue, and I wave a hand as I head into the study Kit and I now share between us. His side of the room is spotless as always, a stark contrast to the chaos covering my desk. I settle into the battered leather seat, flicking through the latest stack of paperwork, agreements and contracts that we put together relatively quickly to temporarily free us up from our many business interests across Sorelle.

To be here. With *her*.

We've redesigned our entire lives to fit around the girl sleeping in our kitchen, and Stasi has no idea. No idea how deep our anger runs. More deeply than she could possibly realize, and I lean back, considering her reaction to our arrival here. Her question about our father.

She doesn't *know*.

And somehow the thought of her not knowing what she did stokes the old anger even further.

She left us in ruins and strolled off to cause misery in someone else's life, without a care in the world.

My hand tightens on the contract in my hand.

She lied to us, betrayed us, and then she left us.

And I fucking hate her for it.

I manage to hold out for another hour or so before throwing the papers down onto the desk and getting up. My feet carry me out of the study almost without thought.

I ease my way back down the steps into the darkness of the kitchen, lit only by the last of the embers in the hearth. They illuminate Stasi's sleeping figure, highlight where she's curled on her side to try to get comfortable. The dull orange glow glints off the edges of the shackles keeping her bound.

I settle down onto the step, my elbows resting on my knees as I watch, track the soft rise and fall of her chest.

Yes, I hate her.

Almost as much as I once stupidly thought I loved her.

And still, I sit here like a fucking idiot until my ass goes numb. I watch Stasi sleep restlessly, tossing and turning as she fights to get comfortable on the solid stone. Unable to believe that she's here, back under the same roof as us.

Except this time, she doesn't get the choice of leaving.

I only slip away when the pink glow of dawn starts to show through the window.

8 – Stasi

The fingers prodding at my shoulder shocks me into awareness. My hands jolt up instinctively, a shocked noise escaping my throat as I'm ripped from the deep sleep I was lost in.

It takes me a minute to adjust. The figure in front of me steps back, and I blink up at her in confusion until I remember.

That farce of a fucking trial.

Oakbourne Manor.

Them.

The woman that greeted us last night – Ellen - watches me closely, impeccably dressed in a tidy blue blouse and charcoal gray skirt. "Good morning, Anastasia."

I push myself upright, glancing around. It can't be long after dawn. The kitchen looks pink in the early morning light, long shadows slowly retreating around us to reveal the wooden units, the giant aga cooker against the far wall. "Morning."

Ellen purses her lips. "You can use the washroom to… freshen up. You have a busy day ahead."

Right. Day one of… around seven thousand. Give or take.

I nod woodenly. I'm still aching as I scramble to my feet and make my way to the bathroom, Ellen's eyes on my back. I wash up as best I can, swilling my mouth with water several times over before I take a breath and make my way back.

Ellen is pulling ingredients from the large refrigerator, stacking them up on the wooden counter. My stomach growls at all the food, and she glances at me. "I'm Ellen, in case you missed it last night. I'm the housekeeper. There's also a maid, Clara, who you'll meet tomorrow. She travels in for a few days each week to help out."

I nod, standing awkwardly. "I'm Stasi."

"I think the whole world knows who you are." Ellen's voice is a little shorter as she gestures me towards a tall stool. "Sit, and I'll run through our routine."

One whole *hour* later, I'm trying to wrap my head around the sheer list of tasks I'm apparently expected to do, courtesy of Silas. "And this is… every day?"

Ellen nods. "You get a slightly different schedule on a Sunday."

I stare down at the list Ellen hands me. Up at dawn. Stoking the fire, helping with breakfast. Then to cleaning. Floors, windows, light fittings, even door hinges. Bathrooms. Bedding. Washing. Day after day, the same thing. Even things that don't

need to be done every day.

And that doesn't include the *chickens*.

I feel a little light-headed as I blink up at Ellen. "Do I… get to eat?"

The edge of her lip curls up, just a little. "Meals will be provided to you."

Well, that's a significant improvement.

Carefully, I fold up the list. Ellen taps her fingers on the counter. "Any questions?"

Slowly, I shake my head. "It all seems pretty self-explanatory. Where do I find the equipment?"

"I'll show you." Ellen regards me for a moment longer. "No questions at all?"

"Uh…," I glance down. "The chains?"

My hope fades away when Ellen shakes her head. "Maybe in a day or two. They were very clear."

I swallow. I bet they were.

Blowing out a breath, I nod. "Alright. Um. Would it be possible to have a toothbrush?"

Ellen looks startled. "You don't have one?"

I spread my hands out ruefully. "Do I look like I have a toothbrush? Or a change of clothes? Anything at all? I came straight from a cell."

Ellen glances at the state of my clothes. She grimaces. "I'm sure we can arrange something. I'll speak to them. A toothbrush at least should be fine."

They can't argue with that, right? It's not like I wouldn't get a toothbrush in prison.

And I'd get underwear.

I open my mouth to ask, but Ellen is already crossing to the steps. "Follow me, and we'll get started."

Sighing, I slide off the stool. I'll ask later.

Ellen leads me through the house. The floors feel familiar beneath my feet, the same marks and scuffs embedded in the wood as there were ten years ago.

Memories. So many damn memories that my throat threatens to close up, and I have to push them away as Ellen pulls open a large cupboard. "You'll find most of what you need in here. If there's anything else, you can come and find me. I'll get you when it's time for breakfast. Start down here, and then you can go upstairs once everyone is up."

Everyone, meaning *them*.

Ellen turns to me, and I nod firmly.

I have absolutely zero plans of venturing anywhere near the Tate brothers.

Maybe I can avoid them altogether. They can't stay here all the time.

I glance over my shoulder, and Ellen stiffens. "The doors are locked."

When my eyes flash to her, she tilts her head. "In case you were thinking of trying to leave."

The chains shake when I lift up my hands. "Where would I even go?"

Where could I run, when the whole fucking world is my enemy? At least right now, with my story splashed across the headlines. The thoughts tumble around in my head as Ellen leaves me to it, and I pull out the sweeping brush and mop.

Maybe… I could run. Eventually. Once they've forgotten my face, once they've moved on to their next piece of entertainment.

But for now, I'm well and truly stuck.

I shuffle back down the large, airy hall. The windows on either side of me stretch almost to the ceiling, and I'm already dreading trying to clean them later.

I start in the entrance hall. Sweeping first, working out how to place my feet to avoid tripping over the damn chains. I use the pan to sweep up the pile of dirt, placing it down on the table in the middle of the room with an apologetic wince. It's not like I won't be cleaning that too.

I carry the bucket down into the kitchen, filling it with hot water from the sink. Ellen watches me from her station as she chops vegetables, but she doesn't say anything as I slowly drag the heavy load back up the steps.

The work might be physically hard, but it's nothing new. My head empties as I work, methodically working from one end of the hall to the other. It seems like it's been a while since they were done at all, and I wonder absently what the other maid, Clara, actually does.

Not the floors, apparently.

It takes three buckets before just the one floor is done, and I glance up the small flight of stairs that leads to the longer hallway with a grimace. My stomach grumbles, and I take the bucket back to the kitchen, casting a hopeful glance in Ellen's direction.

She sighs. "Sit."

She's stirring something in a pot on the cooker, and I watch as she ladles a large portion into a bowl. She slides it down in front of me, and I peer at the gray color. I can almost feel my appetite disappearing. "What… what is it?"

"Porridge," she says briskly, covering the rest of the pot.

I take the spoon she hands me and poke at the surface. It doesn't move. "Um. Does… does everyone have this?"

When Ellen shakes her head, my shoulders slump. Prison food.

Still, it's better than what they gave me in my cell. The porridge is surprisingly tasty, and I work my way through the entire bowl. It's an effort not to swipe my finger around the edges as I take it to the sink and wash it out. I could easily have eaten another bowl at least. Ellen pours me a glass of water, and I gulp it down before rinsing that out too and heading back out to work before she can tell me.

It takes me the rest of the morning to scrub the other floor. The dirt caked into the wood makes me wonder if anyone has actually cleaned it since the last time I was here.

This house used to be spotless.

By the time I'm done, there's a large pile of dirt heaped into a spare bucket on the table, and the floor is gleaming wetly. I rest the mop inside the bucket and take it in, basking in the satisfaction of a job well done.

Now on to one of the hundreds of *other* things I have to do today.

Sighing, I turn to take my dirty water back to the kitchen. Something sounds above my head, and I pause, glancing up at the cream ceiling.

Footsteps.

Swallowing, I move down a step, and then another, cursing the chains that stop me from racing back to the safety of the kitchen.

"Well. What *do* we have here?"

The deep, masculine purr makes my shoulders stiffen, even as I take another step closer to escape.

"*Anastasia*. It's polite to speak when you're spoken to, you know."

Gritting my teeth, I turn slowly. "Good morning. Or is it afternoon now?"

Rafe surveys me lazily. His blonde hair is damp, scraped back as he runs a hand over the golden stubble covering his jaw. "I have no idea. Not all of us are incarcerated here, after all."

I rake my eyes over him. He's changed so much.

The boy I knew so well, replaced by a man that I don't know at all.

"Enjoying the view?" His voice is low. My eyes snap back up to his, the blush coloring my cheeks.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." My voice is haughty. "If you'll excuse me, I have a lot of work to do."

Rafe tsks, the sound pushing out between his teeth as he takes another step. He's dressed smartly, a white shirt with the top two buttons undone tucked into black trousers, and I glance down at his leather shoes.

"Wait," I blurt, throwing my hand up. Rafe actually stops, his brows raising.

"I'm sorry?" he asks slowly.

Swallowing, I gesture at the floor. "It's just… it's clean. And wet. If you step in it…"

My voice trails off at the incredulity in his face. Rafe glances at the floor, his eyes moving to the bucket of dirt on the table. To the other bucket at my side.

And he takes another, very deliberate step.

Damn it.

Of course he's going to walk right through it. I have to roll my eyes as he takes several heavy steps, rubbing his shoes into the floor and leaving sticky footprints behind that I'm going to have to go back over.

Sighing, I lean against the wall. "Thanks for that."

He stops halfway through the room, pausing next to the table in the center. "No need to thank me."

I jolt upright as he peers into the bucket of dirt. "Rafe…"

He glances back at me, green eyes piercing. "There's something you need to learn, Anastasia."

"And that would be…?"

My eyes are glued to the bucket. At his fingers, gripping the edge.

"I'm not here to make your life easier."

I choke as he lifts it. And tips it, flinging the dirt out in a soaring arc that spatters all across the shining floor.

For fuck's sake.

He stomps over to me, his shoes treading the dirt further into the floor as he pushes the bucket into my stomach. He leans in, his breath ghosting over my ear.

"In case you hadn't realized, I'm here to make your life as fucking difficult as possible."

Message received.

But his eyes slide down, and I follow them. To the second bucket, filled with filthy water.

I look at him, at this angry man I don't recognize. "Don't you *dare*—."

He doesn't even hesitate before he kicks it, the metal crashing into the ground as the muddy, murky water flows out. It gushes down the steps and down through the hall, destroying every bit of the hours of work I've spent scrubbing it.

"How clumsy of me." He smiles, then. As if the sight of me staring in horror at the work I have to do all over again brings

him joy.

It's an effort to drag my eyes back to his, to meet his stare. But I do, steeling my shoulders.

"Did that feel good?" I ask him quietly. Looking for any part of the Rafael I remember. "Was it worth it?"

The smile slowly slides away from his face. "Better get started, Anastasia. This floor is disgusting."

But I've already turned away from him, carefully stepping down, reaching to tip the bucket upright. "I have a lot to do, it would seem. So if you wouldn't mind getting the hell out of my way, I'd appreciate it."

I don't look up as his footsteps thunder past me, echoing down the hall until they disappear altogether.

I spend several minutes staring at the empty bucket.

No, these are not the boys I remember. And the sooner I get that fact straight inside my head, the sooner my heart can stop hurting.

I work through lunch. Head down, I scrub every single part of the floor again. Then I move onto the windows, polishing each pane of glass until it shines in the bright afternoon light. Up and down the little stepladder, carefully balancing to reach the top panes.

This is familiar. Safe.

I move on from the common areas to the bathrooms. Slowly, I move upstairs, my head swiveling as I look for any sign of a lingering Tate brother. There's nobody up here, though, no sounds floating from behind the closed doors.

My eyes catch on one particular door at the end. Closed, of course. But then, it always was.

And then I waste several long minutes staring at the very end of the hall. At the empty space there.

And I turn away abruptly, heading into the first bathroom. Then the second. Washing and scraping and cleaning until my hands feel raw and my eyes are gritty from the number of chemicals I've probably unwisely combined. And I haven't even gone into *their* rooms yet, haven't been brave enough to cross that boundary.

I'll have to tomorrow, though.

Ellen finds me as the last of the light fades. I'm in the last bathroom, on my knees trying to clear out the plughole – and *ew*. Thank fuck for rubber gloves. "Anastasia?"

My head jerks up, and I feel a little gratified at the surprise on her face. She glances around the room. "You've done a good job."

I wouldn't say her tone is particularly warm, but it's better than the iciness of this morning as I rest back on my heels. "I'm nearly done with this room."

Her gaze is assessing. I wonder what she expected from me. The spoiled, privileged, *ugly stepsister*.

"Dinner will be ready soon," she says quietly. "The brothers eat in the main dining room, and we'll eat in the kitchen."

"Sounds good to me." Best news I've had all day, in fact. I have no desire to face Rafe again after the hours I spent cleaning up his damn mess earlier, let alone Silas and Kit at the same time.

"Excellent," she says crisply. "You can help carry the plates up."

My mouth opens, and then closes again. "I don't think I'm clean enough for that."

I'm actually disgusting by this point. My clothes feel as though they're about to crawl off me. Ellen grimaces as she looks me over, but she doesn't say anything, and suspicion curls in my stomach. "They've asked for me, haven't they?"

At least she looks a little sheepish. "They have."

It takes me a second. To bite down on my lip, hard. To force down the snappish words I want to throw at her. Our history isn't Ellen's fault.

Slowly, I rise, yanking off my gloves. "Fine."

This should be interesting.

Ellen makes me scrub my hands, my arms, almost up to my shoulders, but it doesn't make much of a difference to the dirt covering the rest of me as I follow her into the dining room. My arms strain under the weight of the silver steel soup tureen I'm carrying. I focus on not dropping it, my eyes very determinedly not moving to the three men sat around the end of the large dining table.

Silas lounges at the end, Rafe and Kit on either side of him.

Something else familiar. Memories of dinners, breakfasts, midnight feasts… I blink them away as though they never existed at all. Ellen directs me to the space between Silas and Kit, and I lean in to place the pot on the protective wooden shelf, bracing as Rafe leans back in his chair.

"Jesus," he remarks. "What is that *smell*?"

My face goes up in flames as I take a few quick steps back, intending to escape from the room as quickly as possible. Even Ellen takes pity on me, gesturing from the doorway to hurry up.

Silas's voice drops into the silence like a whip. "Stay where you are."

I pause, my body already half-turned towards the door. "I wouldn't want to put you off your food."

"Too late for that," Rafe says caustically. "Did you lose your sense of basic hygiene along with your decency, Anastasia?"

I glance towards Ellen, but she's abandoned me, the door closing. "It's a little hard to stay clean when you don't have access

to hot water. Or soap. Or a *toothbrush*."

Kit leans back in his chair, surveying me with his deep violet gaze. Assessing me. "You have access to hot water now," he points out.

I make a show of jangling the chain that links my wrists together. "Ah, yes. The little faucet in the washroom is perfect. Such *generous* jailors you are."

"We are generous," Silas murmurs in response. "If it wasn't for us, you would be rotting away in prison, Anastasia. Or did you forget?"

I press my lips together before I respond. "If you're waiting for a thank you, it's not going to happen. I know why I'm here."

And it's not out of the kindness of their hearts.

Rafe opens his mouth, but Silas holds up a hand, cutting him off. His blue eyes pierce me as he gestures towards the steaming dishes on the table. "In that case," he says silkily. "You'd better get on with it and *serve*."

My body tenses at the idea of moving closer to them. Prey, approaching predators. But my steps are jerky as I ball up my fists and stride up to the table. I yank open the tureen, staring down at the green soup. It feels warm beneath my fingers, the perfect temperature to eat. My stomach rumbles in appreciation for the delicious smell.

"Hurry up," Silas snaps. I battle back the snarl I want to throw at him in response. The sooner I do it, the sooner I can *leave*. At least for tonight.

I grab Kit's bowl first, ladling soup into it until it's nearly overflowing. He doesn't say a word as I drop it in front of him, but I can feel his gaze on me. All of them, watching me.

Rafe holds out his bowl with a smirk, but it slides away when I ignore him, snatching Silas's bowl and filling it. It nearly tips when I shove it towards him. "Your soup. *Sir*."

"Careful," Silas murmurs. "Or that attitude is going to get you into trouble."

I'm already in fucking trouble. The anger creeps up my spine, curling around my neck as I reach for Rafe's bowl and he slides it to the side. I grab for it again and he grins, moving it out of reach just as my fingers brush it. My fingers curl into a fist as he tilts his head, blonde strands of hair slipping from the cord he uses to keep it away from his face. "Didn't Silas tell you to hurry up? You're terrible at this, Anastasia."

I grit my teeth. "Give me the bowl."

He waves a finger in the air. "Please."

Twenty years of *this*?

"Please," I force out. But when I reach for the bowl again, he pulls it away.

"On second thoughts," he leans forward, taking a deep, obvious sniff. "I don't think I want you near my food, Anastasia. I'll serve myself. You smell like a sewer."

"Rafe." But there's amusement in Silas's voice, even as I flinch.

I can't do twenty years of this. I *can't.*

Rafe stares at me, waiting for my reaction. So eager to watch the blows land. My hands drop back down, wrapping against the handles of the soup.

Taking a deep breath, I lift my head up to meet his green eyes.

And I smile.

I give Rafe my bland, empty-faced smile. A smile I've perfected over the last few years. A smile to cover up how dead I feel on the inside.

"Your soup, *sir*."

Rafe's eyes widen a fraction before I shove the heavy container so hard that it tips over. Curses ring out as the soup spills out, the crisp white tablecloth turning deep green as it spreads and pours off the edge.

Directly into Rafe's lap.

I take a step back as he shouts, jumping to his feet. His face flushes. Sticky green pea soup covers him, splashed across his clean white shirt, soaking into his trousers.

My fingers tremble, but I lift my chin up as they all turn to face me. All silent, eyes wide.

My curtsey is awkward, hampered by the chains. I catch Silas's eye as I rise back up. His jaw ticks as he stares at me.

"Enjoy your soup," I say pleasantly. "*Sirs*."

My back is ramrod straight as I turn away from them. Waiting to be called back for whatever punishment they dream up for my little show of rebellion.

But nobody calls my name as I slowly shuffle away, yanking the door open and retracing my footsteps back to the kitchen.

Nobody says anything at all.

Ellen turns to me as I walk into the kitchen, her eyes lifting in surprise. "They finished the soup already?"

Swallowing, I shake my head, debating how to explain. "I… um. I tipped it, actually. Over Rafe. Sorry."

Silence. Ellen gapes at me.

Then her mouth snaps closed. She points to a stool. "Sit."

I sit. She lifts yet another lid on her cooker, ladling something into a bowl before she slides it in front of me. “Eat.”

The broth is clear and tasty, but it tastes like ash in my mouth as I choke it down. Ellen disappears, and I look up miserably when she walks back in. “How much trouble am I in?”

Silas and Rafe will not let this go unpunished. Kit… I don’t know.

The edges of her mouth tip up slightly. “I think you’re safe for this evening. I’ll serve the rest. Clean up in here, and you can settle down for the night.”

Knowing that I don’t have to face them again lightens the weight in my chest. “Thank you, Ellen.”

She watches me closely. A little *too* closely.

“I don’t know your history with them,” she says quietly. “But these are not the men I know, Anastasia.”

Sighing, I stand up.

“Believe me. They’re not the men I know, either.”

9 — Kit

Rafe sputters as the door closes behind Stasi. "I'm going to—,"

"No," I say quietly. Rafe pauses, and Silas turns to me. "No, you're not."

Matching red spots flare up on my twin's cheekbones.

"Kit," Rafe hisses. "Did you see what she did?"

I saw. Saw the way her eyes watered, the way her fingers shook. The humiliation in her face as Rafe poked at her. Like he was ripping open her insecurities and dangling them over her.

"There is a line," I point out. A line that we are dangerously close to crossing.

Rafe huffs, but he doesn't meet my eyes. "She's here to be punished, Kit."

Punished, yes. Abused, no.

"I want to see her punished just as much as you do," I throw back at him. "But this isn't the way to do it."

Silas sighs, leaning back in his chair as he watches Rafe dab uselessly at the green stains on his shirt. "It was only for a day or two, Kit. Not forever."

"She's been here for twenty-four hours." I spread my hands. "That's enough, Silas. I never knew you to be cruel. Keeping her in chains and not letting her clean herself is *cruel*."

He jerks as though I've landed a physical blow. "It's a taste of her own medicine. It's not going to kill her. And she's got a water supply, for fuck's sake."

"Is it?" My words are soft. "Because there was no mention of chains in the reports we read. If this is to be an eye for an eye, let it be a true one."

Silas frowns as I wait. He knows I'm right.

"Fine," he says finally. "I'll take the damn chains off."

I shake my head as Ellen pokes her head around the door, assessing the damage. "I'll do it when we're done here."

Rafe gets up with a curse. "I need to change."

My older brother's eyes linger on my face as he leaves. "Remember why she's here, Kit. However easy it may be to forget."

I have not forgotten.

The rest of dinner is silent. Rafe returns in a clean shirt and trousers, barely touching his food. None of us are in the mood for

conversation. But our eyes stay on the door, flicking away every time Ellen walks through it.

Wondering if she might come back, full of fire and ready for another round.

But dinner ends without any sign of Stasi. Silas passes me the keys with a frown, but he doesn't say anything as I push my chair back.

Rafe glowers from his seat. "I'd leave her for tonight, at least."

My response is clear as the door to the kitchen closes behind me.

When I enter, Stasi is at the basin, washing dishes. Ellen catches my eye, and I jerk my head towards the door in a silent request. When she hesitates, her eyes flicking to the girl with hunched shoulders, I hold up the keys in answer to her unspoken question.

"Anastasia." My voice is soft, but she still whirls around, soap suds flying into the air as a hand presses against her chest. Brown eyes drop down to the keys in my hand.

"Come to tighten them up?" Stasi lifts her wrists. "If you want me to be able to *work*, I'd leave them as they are."

The words sound casual enough, but her mouth is twisted. When I take a step, she flinches, and I pause, eyeing her. "I said I wouldn't hurt you."

She casts a quick glance to the door behind me. "I learned a long time ago not to take what people say as the truth."

I study her, pondering her words. "Do you mean us?"

She half-shrugs. "I… not in particular. Just… everyone."

Everyone.

Frowning, I take another step, and then another, until I'm right in front of her. Stasi blinks as I kneel. "What are you doing?"

"Taking these off." Leaning back on my heels, I look up at her. "Unless you'd prefer they stayed on?"

She shakes her head, letting loose a breath. "No. I – yes. Please. Take them off."

Slowly, I wrap my hand around the cool skin of her ankle. It feels small in my grip, almost frail, and when I slide the key into the lock and undo it, Stasi flinches again.

I glance down, my throat tightening at the band of red that appears as the shackles loosen. Raised, thick welts, as though the metal has been rubbing against the fragile skin. "These were done too tightly. Why didn't you say anything?"

She yanks away from me, reaching down to massage the abused skin. "Like you would have cared."

There's no heat in her words. Just exhaustion, as she pushes the metal off. It clinks as it falls to the floor, and my mouth tightens. "Who says I don't?"

The words slip out, and she shoots me a disbelieving look as I stand and move my attention to her wrists. A thick metal band circles each one, linked by a chain as I flick through the keys in my hand for the right one. "Please. As if you're not all intent on making my life as horrible as it can possibly be for as long as I'm here."

She lets out an audible breath of relief as the shackles loosen, and I turn her wrist gently, inspecting the marks. These were on tighter still, the skin almost raw underneath. The sight of her skin, marked up like this… my mouth firms.

"Who put these on you?"

My voice is harsh in the small space, and her eyes lift to mine. "Parrish."

"*Parrish*," I repeat slowly. "Who the hell is Parrish?"

She scoffs. "You'd like him. He's part of the *I hate Anastasia* club too. Maybe you could all wear matching badges."

She tries to pull her hand away, but my grip tightens. "Tell me about him."

She looks away from me. "Nobody. He was a guard. An asshole guard."

A guard.

I do the math in my head. She was in that cell for weeks, based on the headlines. A month at least.

"Did he hurt you anywhere else?" I ask quietly. My finger traces the marks, and she hisses.

"Stop it," she whispers. "It doesn't matter, Kit."

The denial rises up in my throat. It doesn't *matter*?

"It matters," I say shortly. "Tell me."

She pulls, but I hold steady. "Why? So you can hold it over me? Laugh at me? Tell Rafe, so he can throw it at me as a punishment? I don't think so."

The bitterness in her voice smacks into my skin like bullets. "We wouldn't do that."

I know my twin. Better than he knows himself. He may be angry, may throw words around in sharp strikes, but I know that if he finds out about this, finds out that somebody put marks on Anastasia's skin, *Parrish* is a dead fucking man.

Although not if I get to him first.

Her laugh is sharp shards of hopelessness. "Sure."

I finally let her wrist go, only to slide my fingers down, entangling them with hers. She freezes. "Wha- what are you doing?"

Maybe Silas was right. It would be easy to forget, to lose myself in the feeling of her hand in mine. Exactly where it was always supposed to be.

My words drag from my chest, brusque and deep. "Come with me."

For a moment, I think she'll argue. Think she'll rip her fingers from mine, and if that happens, I might just drag her with me anyway.

But she doesn't. Her fingers slowly curl around mine, a silent acceptance. "Where?"

I lead her from the kitchen, glancing around for any sign of my brothers or Ellen, but the hall is deserted. We head up the steps into the hall, and then up to the second floor. Stasi hesitates as I push open a door. "Kit."

I squeeze her fingers in response.

Trust me.

She follows me into my bedroom, her head twisting as she takes it in. "A little different to how it used to be."

A little, but not a lot. My bed sits in the middle of the room, the four-poster covered in sheets of pale gray. The wooden floor is clearer now than when I was a teen, but stacks of sheet music still sit in piles, most of them unrecognizable under the red ink I like to scribble over them with.

"You still play?" Stasi's voice is a whisper, and I nod as I cross to the bathroom and pull the door open.

"Sometimes."

Although not as much as I used to.

I turn to survey her, leaning against the door as she bends down to pick up a sheet before she straightens, her eyes moving to mine. "Why am I here, Kit?"

I tilt my head to the room behind me. "I thought you might want to clean up a little."

Stasi's face twists in sudden hope. "You… I can use your shower?"

She sounds so shocked that I stare at her for a moment. "Did you think we'd leave you like this forever?"

And I see the answer, in the way the crease between her eyebrows dips low. In the confusion that enters her eyes.

She *did*. She expected us to leave her chained up, to restrict access to basic human needs like hygiene.

"Stasi." My voice is rough. "Jesus. We're not animals."

But I suppose we haven't given her much reason to believe we aren't.

Not waiting for a response, I duck inside the bathroom, flicking on the hot water and testing the temperature. A stack of clean towels rests on the shelf, and I pull one off for her.

I feel her eyes on me when she appears in the doorway. "Kit..."

I point to the towels, cutting off whatever she's about to say. My chest feels tight, and I avoid her eyes. "Use whatever you need. There's some washing stuff in there. I'll… get you something to wear. Take as long as you need to."

She shifts. "Okay."

Her voice is small. I wait until the door closes to start searching for clothes. There aren't many options. I grab a shirt, my hands hesitating over a pair of clean boxers before I grab those too.

We'll have to get her something. She can't spend the next twenty years wearing my underwear.

I approach the door slowly. Twenty *years*.

It finally starts to sink in.

Twenty years as her jailors.

But also… twenty years of taking care of her. That's what we signed up to, in our anger. Because none of us, not me, not Silas, and not Rafe either, despite his bravado, are going to let anything truly bad happen to her, even as she serves out her sentence.

Although we haven't started off well.

I raise my hand to knock, to call out, but then I pause. My ear presses against the door.

The soft, choking sobs are barely audible over the water. But I hear them, anyway. Each one feels like a sharp knife, sliding into my chest.

Slowly, I close my eyes. Turning, I sink down onto the floor, bringing up my knees and resting my elbows on them as I lean back.

Shit.

10 — Stasi

Slowly, I peel off the dress they gave me at the prison. My underwear follows, and I carefully place the only thing I've been able to keep with me on the counter after fishing it out of my bra.

The tears well up as I step into the hot water, tip my face up into the hot spray.

I can't stop them.

They mix with the water, sliding down my face as I frantically scrub. Trails of brown streak the white tiles, washing away down the plughole as I work layer after layer of dirt from my skin, careful to avoid the stinging welts on my wrists and ankles.

I never thought I'd be so grateful for a fucking *shower*.

They know exactly what they're doing, the Tate brothers.

Give with one hand. Take away with another. Leaving me on edge, off balance.

Slowly, I sink down onto the floor. The water streams over my matted hair as I wrap my arms around my knees and bury my face in them, digging my nails into the skin to try and hold the sobs back. It doesn't work, not in the least, but it makes me feel better anyway. Not quite so exposed.

I stay there until the water runs clear. Until I feel like I can breathe again.

My resolve is tested when I try to wash my hair. Kit's mint scented shampoo doesn't help me get the knots out, even as I try and work around them. I wash it through three times before I finally give up, flicking off the water and wrapping the towel around myself as I step out onto the mat.

At least I'm clean.

I glance around the bathroom, searching for a toothbrush. There's one in a cup, which must be Kits. The cupboards are nearly empty when I search them, just a few products and some painkillers. I take two, swallowing them down with water from the faucet to try to chase away the lingering aches in my head and body.

I feel almost human again.

Another glance at the toothbrush, and I bite my lip. Desperation wins out.

Sorry, Kit.

It feels intimate, to use his toothbrush. When I glance in the mirror, my cheeks are bright and flushed, even as my hair hangs in tangled rope around my face.

There's a knock in the door, and I whirl as it opens a crack. A hand appears. "Here."

Slowly, I reach out and close my fingers around the bundle. "Thanks."

I shake it open, and stare at the black underwear. My cheeks heat.

Maybe Ellen could lend me something. But we're very different sizes. Slowly, I drag the underwear on, slipping on my dirty bra with a cringe. At least I can actually wash it now. Now I can take it off, thanks to Kit removing the chains.

The white shirt drowns me, falling past my knees. I roll the sleeves up before I open the bathroom door, clearing my throat. "Kit?"

He's waiting, stood in the middle of the bedroom with his arms crossed. Violet eyes flick over me, taking in the shirt. My toes curl as his gaze drops down to my legs, and he swallows.

"Sit on the bed for me." His voice is husky, and it takes me a second to realize what he's holding up.

Oh. I flush, crossing to the bed and perching on the end.

Kit unscrews the tube, his hand circling my wrist carefully as he smooths the cool cream into the marks left by the chains.

"So," he says, clearing his throat. "Back to Parrish."

"Let it go, Kit," I say. My voice is tired. Matching the rest of me. "It really doesn't matter."

His jaw tightens as I glance up at him. He finishes with my wrists, and I take a breath as he drops to the floor, kneeling to look at my ankles. Kit looks up at me. "Maybe it matters to me."

"Don't like other people touching your toys?" My voice is acerbic, and he slows in his movements.

"Have I ever given you that impression?" he asks quietly. "That you were a toy?"

I bite my lip. No, he hasn't.

"If anything," he murmurs, "it was the other way around, in the end. Wouldn't you agree?"

The reminder hits me somewhere below my stomach.

That's what they think. Kit and Rafe.

They think that I used them. That I *ran* from them.

Silas never told them—

But Kit is reading my face. "What?"

I drop my eyes. "Nothing. Are… are we done?"

He watches me for a second longer, before his fingers drop from my skin and he stands. His eyes travel across my face, my hair. I try not to shrink into myself.

"We're done. I'll take you back."

His voice is cooler, now. Kit walks me back to the kitchen, keeping his distance as though our conversation has reminded him.

The world hates me for one thing.

But they hate me for another.

He leaves me at the door to the kitchen, watching until I walk in. The dishes have been cleared away, the counter sparkling, and I send a mental thanks to Ellen for not leaving them for me. I settle down in front of the hearth, the thoughts tumbling over and over in my head.

Kit's face when he saw my ankles. Rafe's fury at the dinner table that I just know I'll be paying for tomorrow. Silas's cold anger.

It all flips over inside my head, until my eyes eventually close.

Day one done.

Thousands more to go.

11 — Rafe — ten years ago

"*Quick*."

I muffle my laugh at Kit's horrified hiss. We slip out of the back door as Angelica's howl rings through the house. "Oh, yeah. She's livid."

Our father's new squeeze is a little… *much*.

A little too happy. Too many bright smiles that don't reach her eyes. Too many awkward hugs, as though she's trying to prove to our dad what an *excellent mother* she is.

Too bad she doesn't realize that it's showing us the exact opposite. My father is still blind to her, but he'll see it eventually. All we had to do was watch her with her own daughter.

The smiles become a little too brittle. The fingers just a little too pointed as they jab. And Anastasia just takes it, as empty-headed as her mother.

So my twin and I decided to test the lovely Angelica. And if the screaming is any indicator, she's discovered our little gift.

I feel a little sorry for the newt, being trapped in her bathrobe. But it's for a good cause.

Kit and I break into laughter as we sneak under the kitchen window and down towards the stream, cutting through the orchard.

I slow as I spot something ahead. Kit pauses next to me, shielding his eyes. "The hell is she doing?"

We both watch as the girl scales another foot of the old apple tree. She's already several feet from the ground, surprisingly nimble as she pulls herself up onto another branch.

Little idiot. She's going to get herself killed.

Kit takes off, and I follow him to the foot of the tree. Anastasia is oblivious to our presence as she settles back against the tree, perched on a brand with an apple in her hand.

A curl of interest appears in my stomach as I watch her. She's kept to herself in the week or so since they arrived. Hiding in her room, silent at meals despite my father's attempts to draw her out. Awkward and out of place.

But here, she looks… free. Eyes closed, she takes a bite of her apple. Her hair dances around her face in the breeze.

"What are you doing?" Kit hisses, as I put my foot on the first branch. I glance over to him.

"Getting to know our new *sister*."

Wiggling my eyebrows, I ignore his frustrated mutters as I climb. I glance up to where a clueless Anastasia is still sitting, one leg dangling from the branch. She looks completely at ease, lips humming tunelessly.

When I get close enough, I call out. "Morning."

The response is gratifying. Her eyes fly open and she jerks upright. The branch sways beneath her, and I hold out a hand, suddenly debating the wisdom of startling her this high up. "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

She eyes me, skepticism on her face. "Sure you didn't."

Then she closes her eyes again, effectively dismissing me. My eyebrows draw together as I glance down to my brother. Kit stares up at us, and he shrugs, motioning me down.

Instead, I climb up further. Anastasia's eyes fly open as I settle next to her on the branch. "What are you *doing*?"

Thise close, I can see the freckles dotting her skin. Deep brown eyes flecked with amber glare at me as I reach out and tug her hair, scraped back into a braid that lies over her shoulder. "I thought we could get to know each other a bit better."

She blinks. "We could do that on the ground."

Crossing my arms, I shake my head. "I'd say yes, but you seem to disappear every time we try. A little curious, I must admit."

I smile as the flush spreads across her cheeks and down to her collarbone. "I'm not avoiding you."

I lean in, my whisper loud. "Liar."

She purses her lips, glancing away. "I should get inside. My mother will be looking for me."

"Will she?" I shoot back. "Because she doesn't seem to look for you much at all."

I only meant that Angelica seems to be pretty self-serving. If it's not about her, then she's not interested. But Anastasia flinches, and I immediately feel like an asshole. "I didn't mean—,"

"Forget it," she mutters. She tries to shift on the branch, and it creaks. "This isn't big enough for both of us."

Her voice is flat now, and I study her more closely. "Hey," I say softly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

She sniffs. "You didn't."

She doesn't look at me, and I… I don't like it.

So I reach out, tipping her chin up to see her face.

"Have you heard of personal space?" she snaps. Her fingers slap at mine.

I grin at her. "Is that what that's called?"

She huffs. "I'm getting down now, Rafael."

"Rafe," I say immediately. "Call me Rafe."

She squints at me. "Okay… Rafe. Getting down now."

Her movements are sure and steady as she shifts. But the branch creaks again, and I hold out a hand. "Wait."

She rolls her eyes at me. "This isn't the first tree I've climbed."

"I guessed," I say drily. "But there's two of us on this branch, and we're pretty high. So maybe just—,"

I'm too late.

The branch snaps beneath us, and Anastasia's eyes lock on mine for a split second, fear widening them as she reaches towards me.

And then she *drops*, her fingers barely brushing mine before I lose sight of her.

The air rushes from my lungs as I hit the next branch down, my stomach groaning in protest as I pull myself up. "*Anastasia*!"

I bellow her name, trying to look down. "Kit!"

Fuck – *fuck*.

There's a shout from below me as I slide down as quickly as I can, the bark dragging against the skin of my palms. I drop from a few feet higher than I should, my knees taking the brunt of the impact as I land on the packed mud with a solid thump.

But I don't care. I'm already scrambling towards the girl on the ground, my heart in my throat. "Kit," I say hoarsely. "Is she —,"

He ducks out of the way, and something hits me in the head. *Hard*.

"W hat the fuc- *ow*," I rasp, my hand flying up. "What – is she alright?"

"I'm *fine*," a furious, feminine voice hisses. "No thanks to you and your ass taking up all the weight on *my damn branch*."

My vision clears, and I see her drawing back with another apple. I duck it with a yelp. "Jesus *Christ*, you harpy. Will you stop? I thought you were *dead*!"

She's sat on the floor, and relief fills my chest to see her apparently very much not dead.

But then I see the wince as she moves her left arm – the one *not* throwing apples at my head. "What's wrong with your arm?"

Kit tries to inspect it as she lifts another apple threateningly, and she pins him with a look that has him backing away with his hands in the air. "Nothing."

But a sound of pain escapes her as she scrambles to her feet. Kit slides his hand under her right arm – to hold her steady or disarm her. Anastasia gives him a cutting glance. "You can let go. I'm not going to fall."

I stride towards her. No, she's not going to fall.

She's a bundle of fire and fury in my arms as I sweep her legs out from underneath her and set out for the house, Kit falling in

on my other side.

She yelps in shock. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“You have a mouth like a sailor, *Stasi*,” I shoot back. My eyes drop to her lips and slide away.

She’s *fifteen*.

I’m seventeen.

It’s not like that. But this protective feeling in my chest… this is new. At least for anyone outside of my immediate family.

She’s cursing me again, but I just hold her tighter, my arms curling around her protectively as I head for the house to get help. To make sure she’s not hurt.

My father calls a doctor, who confirms that her wrist is sprained. Kit and I both get a verbal slapdown, but I don’t give a fuck.

As soon as it’s over, we head back to Anastasia’s room. She’s propped up, staring morosely out of the window towards the orchard.

We sit by her bedside.

She sniffs. “Back again?”

“Couldn’t stay away,” I drawl. “Must have been your sparkling personality.”

I catch it, then. Just a glimpse. Like it’s something precious.

The edge of a smile on her lips.

And as I sit there, teasing and taunting until she finally grants me the full effect of her laughter, I feel Stasi weave her way into my heart.

She won’t be fifteen forever. Two years.

I can wait two years.

For *her*.

12 — Rafe

When I wake up, my mood is somehow, impossibly worse than it was last night.

Hours of broken dreams and fractured nightmares will do that.

But it was worth setting my alarm early. As I slip out of the kitchen with my stolen goods, Stasi still sleeping next to the hearth, my mood begins to lift.

And when I jump down the last of the steps with a whistle a few hours later, it's even more worth it for the look on Anastasia's face.

She leans heavily on the broom in her hands. "I suppose I have you to thank for this?"

I make a show of glancing down the hall. The floor is white, the barest traces of the wood showing.

Hundreds, thousands, maybe millions of tiny little pieces of white rice. *Everywhere.*

"Now, why on earth would I have anything to do with this?" I ask, enjoying myself.

Stasi stares at the floor. "I think you're the biggest asshole I've ever met. And I've met a lot."

I saunter towards her, reveling in the crunch beneath my feet. Silas will lose his shit when he sees this. Still worth it. "Better get cracking. This rice won't clean itself up."

Stasi gapes as I swipe the broom from her hands. "I need that!"

Pursing my lips, I shake my head. "Hmmm. Nope. Hands only, I'm afraid."

"*Rafe*." She grabs for it, but I pull it back, out of her reach and enjoying the furious look on her face *immensely*.

"I hate you," she snaps. I spend a highly satisfying few seconds watching as she drops to her knees and tries to grab the rice in her hands. Most of it just falls out. I start to whistle again as I make my way down the hall with the broom in my hands.

The attack comes just as I reach the end. I sense her coming a split second before a hand pulls down the back of my shirt collar, and I choke as a large handful of rice slides down my back. "Motherf—,"

Spinning, I grab Stasi's hands. She snarls at me as I walk her backwards until she's pressed into the wall. The satisfaction is clear in her eyes as I shake, feeling the rice slipping further down.

For fucks' sake.

"You," I hiss, "are a fucking terrible prisoner."

"And you," she snaps back, "are a cunt, Rafael Tate."

She still has a mouth like a damn sailor. But this Stasi feels unfamiliar in my hands, all soft skin and doe eyes and *curves*.

This Stasi is all woman. Furious, angry, passionate woman.

And she feels like fucking heaven in my arms.

Her chest heaves, and I do a double-take as I recognize the shirt she's wearing.

A growl sounds in the back of my throat. She might be pissed, but so am I. "Why the *fuck* are you wearing my brother's shirt?"

She tips her chin up. "Because Kit is a far better fucking person than you, *Rafael*."

Jealousy stabs at my chest as I release her, stepping back. Kit went to her last night. Took care of her. I take in the fresh scent of her, the hint of mint.

Then my eyes drop to her wrists.

"What," I say carefully, "the *fuck*, is that on your wrists?"

Anastasia stills at the change in my tone. She glances down, realization lighting her face. "What – you didn't think the chains would leave a mark?"

I can't stop staring at the angry, purple bruising. "They don't leave marks like that."

Anastasia yanks down the edges of Kit's shirt. "They do when they're put on too tightly and left on for too fucking long. Any more genius observations, or can I get on with my work now?"

My eyes fly up at the shakiness in her voice. "Anastasia—,"

"No," she forces out. Her hands reach up, shoving at my chest until I reluctantly back up a few steps. "You don't get to do that, Rafe. You don't."

"Do what?" I rasp.

Her finger stabs into my chest. "You don't get to take control of my life, treat me like dirt and then look at me as if *you're* the wounded hero. Fuck off with that narrative."

My eyes narrow, my temper igniting again. "What, you think *you're* the wronged one here? The *ugly stepsister*? We're hardly the only people you seem to have fucked over. Just the first."

Although, who knows. Maybe there were others before us. There sure as hell were others after.

It's a direct hit, and her face shutters. It gives me the exact same feeling as it did ten years ago. It still makes me feel like shit.

"Thanks to you," she forces out, "I have years of this to look forward to. So let me work, Rafe. Just stay out of my way, and I'll stay out of yours. Please."

"Fine," I snap, turning away.

She wants to work?

She can fucking work.

13 - Stasi

Rafe takes me at my word.

The next morning, I stare wordlessly around me at the flour coating the floor in a thick layer. My mop and brush have disappeared completely, leaving me to struggle on my hands and knees for hours as I scrub, trying to pick up the thick sludge until my back and knees are screaming for relief.

When Rafe comes down, he walks past me without a word.

The next day is eggs, much to everyone's disgust. The whites stick to the floor, getting into the cracks.

Then it's sugar.

Oats.

Flour *again.*

Something every single damn day, even though Ellen moves her whole kitchen around to try and stop him from raiding it.

It feels like that fucking hallway consumes my entire existence as I spend my days cleaning up Rafe's temper tantrums.

And every day, I hate him a little bit more for it.

But I find myself falling into the routine. Hallway. Breakfast. Hallway again. Sometimes lunch, if it's a good day. If it's not, I work until dinner trying to clear the mess. No matter what, I make sure the hallway is cleared at the end of each day, not a speck of mess to be seen. And I never, ever say a word.

Ellen starts slipping me freshly baked bread with my broth at dinner, her mouth turned down in what I think might be a speck of pity.

I'm not sure what I'm proving. Maybe something to Rafe, that he can't wear me down. Or maybe something to myself, that I refuse to admit as I scrape and scrub until my nails are little more than stubs.

I can't do most of the chores on the damn list Silas came up with. There just aren't enough hours in the day. So Ellen ropes in Clara.

I fucking hate Clara.

Clara, with her shiny, clean blonde hair and perfect blue eyes. She reminds me of Ella, right down to her catty but *oh-I'm-just-so-sweet-and-innocent* nature.

"Oh!" she exclaims when I first meet her.

I stumble into the kitchen, covered head to toe in white fucking flour, making more mess as I try and brush myself off. She smirks at me where she leans against the counter, effortlessly elegant even in her crisp white blouse and indecently short black skirt.

"So *you're* the ugly stepsister? I thought that was just something they made up!"

Bitch.

Blandly, I look her up and down. "That's a lovely belt. Where did you get it?"

She blinks at me, and I smile sweetly. "Oh, I'm so sorry! Is that supposed to be your skirt? They must not pay you enough to get the whole thing."

Ellen coughs as the smug smile wipes away from Carla's face. "Now, then. Carla, you need to do the bathrooms today."

"I thought I wasn't supposed to do the bathrooms anymore?" If it were possible, I'd be dead from the daggers flashing in Carla's eyes. "Isn't that what *she's* here for?"

Ellen raises her eyebrows. "You'll do the work you're assigned. Get going."

I never knew that hate at first sight was a thing until now. But I manage to avoid Carla for the most part, apart from when she walks through the mess created by Rafe. She always makes sure to really rub her feet into the floor, or to kick the mess up the wall.

Still, it's a routine. And I find myself clinging to it, clinging to the certainty of what each day will bring.

Kit appears at the kitchen doorway a few days into my Rafe-imposed punishment as I'm finishing up my dinner. My eyes are on the verge of closing by themselves, but I straighten. His eyes drop down to my wrists. "They look better."

Pushing away my empty bowl, I nod. The bruising is healing, still there but lighter than it was. "Can I get you something?"

He looks around the kitchen, his violet eyes dropping to the floor in front of the hearth. "Ah – no. I actually brought you something."

He lifts the bag at his side awkwardly. "It took a few days to arrive."

I blink as he steps forward, placing the bag in front of me. "For me?"

Kit rubs at his neck. "You don't… I know you don't have anything. It's not much, but you can't go on without any clothes. Or… other things."

There's a hint of color in his cheeks as I look up at him for a long moment. "Thank you."

He nods in response. And then he's gone.

And I'm left with three new sets of clothes. Some basic underwear. A toothbrush. Shampoo. Sanitary products.

A hairbrush. And *conditioner.*

I nearly cry again when Ellen quietly points me towards a spare bathroom. "For you to use during your… stay."

My days begin to pass relatively peacefully. And if I can't stop myself from glancing at Rafe's back as he disappears away from me, if I look for Kit in the creaking shadows at night, then it's a small price to pay for being left the hell alone.

I don't see Silas at all.

No taunts, with the exception of Clara's little digs. Nobody chains me up, or threatens me, or spits in my face. I get regular meals, and I manage to sneak a towel down to the kitchen that I use as a pillow for my head.

"Really," I say to myself in the little bathroom mirror one night. "This is practically a luxury."

Ignoring the deepening circles under my eyes, I poke at my hair despondently. It's still knotted as hell, even though I've used most of the conditioner from Kit on trying to work through it. Sighing, I flick the light off and head back to the kitchen.

"Anastasia," Ellen turns to me with surprise. "You're done for today?"

I nod. The cereal Rafe chose today wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be. Ellen sighs, and my eyes slide past her to the stack of plates. "I might need your help at dinner."

My eyes jerk back to her. Pleading. "What about Clara?"

Ellen grimaces. "She's sick today."

Of course she is.

"I know you don't like it," Ellen says in a no-nonsense tone, "but if you can avoid throwing soup on anyone, I would very much appreciate it."

I flush. "That was *one* time."

"The only time." Ellen pins me with a frown, and I relent, holding up my hands.

"Yes, the only time."

Unless Rafe decides to mouth off again.

But tonight, he's nowhere to be seen. I carry out the plates, setting one in front of Silas and one in front of Kit. When I place one down in front of Rafe's empty chair, Silas deigns to address me.

"Take it away," he says abruptly. "He's not coming back until later."

Silently, I pull the plate back. Maybe I'll get a respite from the floor wars tomorrow.

Silas and Kit are talking when I come back out with a tray.

"It seems to be everywhere," Silas sighs. "I'm sure it's nothing more than a bad flu."

Kit scoffs. “The press like to exaggerate. Probably no more than a cold.”

My hands shake as I try to reach over and place the heavy tray in the center of the table. Warm hands cover mine, gently setting it down. “I’ve got it.”

“Thanks.” I don’t look at Kit as I ease back, fully intending to escape to the safety of the kitchen. But Silas, it would seem, has other plans.

“Anastasia.”

Bracing myself, I turn. “Yes?”

Silas watches me, but he doesn’t say anything. I lift up my chin. “Did I do something wrong?”

Apparently, even my *words* are wrong, because his eyes harden. “Sit.”

I cast a glance towards Kit, but he’s watching Silas with his eyebrows furrowed.

Now I’m really worried. “Uh – actually, I think I hear Ellen calling—,”

“Sit. Down.”

I sit my ass gingerly in an empty chair.

“There we go.” Silas settles back in his chair. He looks casual, his sleeves pushed back as he reaches for his glass, taking a sip of wine before he places it back down. “How have you settled in?”

“Uh…,” My eyes flick between him and Kit. “Fine.”

As fine as you can when you have absolutely zero choice.

“Good,” he says silkily. “In that case, would you care to explain why you haven’t been completing the tasks I set out for you?”

I frown. “I have.”

“No, you haven’t.” His eyes lock with mine. “I gave Ellen a list of tasks, and I expect them to be completed. Daily. By *you*.”

That long-ass fucking list. Blinking, I feel my cheeks growing hot. “But the *floors*—,”

“Excuses don’t wash with me,” he says mildly. “I expect the full list to be completed. Every day. It’s not our fault if you’re not moving fast enough.”

I stare at him.

I get up before sunrise.

I don’t stop until it’s dark.

I don’t stop at all. Fury washes across my vision in white hot streaks.

“Very well,” I grit out, pushing my chair back. “Is that all?”

Slowly, he nods. A smug smile curls the corner of his lips, and how I fucking despise him for it. “I look forward to seeing an improvement in your work ethic.”

Sanctimonious prick. I bite down on my tongue, hard, focusing on the bite of pain to stop me from opening my mouth and telling him exactly what I think of his orders and where he can shove his fucking *work ethic*.

But I still slam the door behind me.

14 — Silas

Kit barely waits until the door closes with enough force that I wonder if it's cracked. "What the hell was that?"

I take a sip of my wine. "She's not doing what she should be."

"Because Rafe is fucking with her." Kit slams his hand down on the table. "That's bullshit, Si. She doesn't stop working."

"Good," I say shortly. "That's why she's here. Remember?"

Anger flashes across Kit's face. "Is there any part of you that doesn't despise her?"

I hold his eyes. "No."

There's a thin fucking line between love and hate. And Anastasia crossed it a long damn time ago, when she made the decision to lie to me, to all of us.

She should be grateful to be here instead of in a filthy cell, but all I get is fucking attitude. From her, and my brothers.

"You're going to break her," Kit says softly. "She's not a machine, Silas. What will you do then?"

I roll my eyes. "It won't hurt her to do some work for a change. Have you forgotten what she did to her stepsister?"

Kit presses his lips together. "Are you sure about what happened there? Because I'm not."

I pause. "You think they got it wrong?"

Impossible. The evidence was overwhelming. They found it all, after her sister ran for help. No, Anastasia is exactly who I know she is. "You're blinded because you want her, Kit."

My brother stands. "What if you've got it wrong? What if you're the one that's blinded? You hate her more than Rafe and I combined. Why?"

I stare into my glass, not responding.

If you hurt them, I will destroy you.

I have no plans to hurt them.

My hand clenches. "She's a liar, Kit. Be careful."

But I'm speaking to an empty room. My brother has already stormed out.

15 — Silas — ten years ago

I hear her before I see her.

Hesitating, I debate just turning around and going back to my room. I've managed to successfully avoid any face-to-face interaction with the delightful Angelica and her scrawny daughter since their arrival, aside from the uncomfortable family dinners enforced by my father.

But the twins are enamored by her. Won't leave her side. It's a miracle that she's alone at all.

Their obsession is enough to make me at least a little curious about the girl. So I slowly approach the end of the hall. She's tucked away in the empty space, almost invisible apart from the quiet sobs. Her head shoots up, and she wipes away the tears frantically. "Sorry. I was just—,"

"Why are you crying?"

The words slip out, and she shakes her head in blatant denial. "I wasn't crying."

A tear plops off her chin with perfect timing, and she reaches up to swipe it away, her chin lifting into the air.

"Sure," I say shortly. "Your eyes appear to be leaking, in that case."

She stares up at me, and I blink at the directness of her gaze. "Feel free to turn around, walk away and continue ignoring me, if it bothers you so much. You do it very well already."

My head tilts to the side in curiosity. She balks when I take a seat next to her on the floor instead, my back resting against the wall. "What are you doing?"

"*Not* ignoring you." Not looking at her, I stare at the art across from us. "Come on, then. Out with it."

I wait for a few minutes, until she gives in. I can almost feel her wrestling with her words. "My… my father died. Five years ago today."

I glance down at her, mildly surprised. "I didn't know that. That he'd died. I'm… sorry."

I assumed he'd left. Anastasia shakes her head. "My mother… she doesn't like to talk about him. Or acknowledge him at all, really."

"Why not?" I'm genuinely curious. Dad talks about our mother all the time. Even though none of us really remember her, since she died when the twins were born. All I remember is her voice. But he keeps her memory alive enough for me to feel that I have a sense of who she was. I don't feel as if I'm missing parts of her, even though she isn't here.

And I know that she was nothing like cold, greedy, grasping fucking Angelica.

"Things changed," she whispers. "When he died. I…. I should go."

But when she moves to get up, I stop her with my hand over hers. "Tell me."

I don't feel sorry for her. If anything, I'm wondering if the information I'm about to learn might free us from the curse of Angelica. I can't stand the woman, and the twins aren't keen either.

But they'll put up with her, for *Anastasia*. We've already had that discussion.

I rake my eyes over her face. She's by no means the prettiest girl I've ever seen, although I suppose her eyes are nice enough. "Why *are* my brothers so obsessed with you?"

A hint of color appears on her cheekbones. "They're not *obsessed* with me. But… I like them."

She sounds like she means it. And I watch her closely.

"If you hurt them," I say finally, "I will destroy you."

She stiffens. "Your social skills could use some work, you know that? And I have no plans to hurt them."

"I mean it." I stare down at her. She swallows, but she meets my eyes.

And the faintest thread of respect works its way into my chest when she nods. "Warning received."

I shift. I've said my piece. She's had her warning. I can leave now.

But I don't actually move. My fingers tap restlessly against the floor, my eyes flicking down.

"Tell me about you."

As she begins to speak, I realize that I like the sound of her voice. And I don't like many people. Too shrill. Too much. But Anastasia – *Stasi*, she reminds me – her voice is husky. Soothing.

She tells me about her childhood. About her father, and his travels. How he'd bring her back a book from every place he went, until one day he didn't come back at all. Her voice begins to shake, and I quickly change tack.

"You enjoy reading?" I ask her. My voice is a little softer this time, and she grasps onto the change in subject even as her eyes flick to mine in awareness, a silent communication that she knows what I'm doing.

"I do. I prefer to write, though."

My eyebrows raise in interest. "What do you write?"

She flushes. "Anything. Everything. Poetry. Fiction. I… that's what I want to study, when I'm old enough. At college. It sounds stupid, I know."

"Nothing sounds stupid with enough conviction behind it," I say and she laughs, leaning against me. "True."

"I would like to read something you've written." She doesn't strike me as someone who would waste her words on frivolity. I wonder if her directness bleeds into her writing. What more it will tell me about this girl.

"Maybe I'll show you. You have to promise not to laugh, though."

Time ticks away. We talk for hours, until the twins find us tucked away in the corner of the hall. Even then, I find that I'm reluctant to stop, reluctant to give up the time that I've spent listening to her. Even for them as they tease her away from me with promises of an afternoon picnic by the stream.

She turns to me before she leaves. Hesitation lingers in her brown eyes as they scan my face. "Same… same time tomorrow?"

My eyes jerk to hers.

Slowly, I nod.

And somehow, over the weeks and months we spend in quiet corners, talking and laughing and sharing our fucking souls, Anastasia works her way into my heart, right alongside the twins.

And then she rips it apart, from the inside out.

16 — Stasi

I hate them.

I hate them all. Silas. Rafe. Even Kit, for being fucking *related* to them.

And Clara. I fucking *detest* her.

At this point, the hate is all that's keeping me upright.

I jerk my head out of the hearth. I'm covered in dirt from head to toe trying to clean it out, and I stare down at the pile of washing that's just thumped down next to me. "Machine's right over there, Clara."

"Oh," she purrs. "But Silas specifically said that *you* were to do it."

I grit my teeth. Of course he did. "Right."

"And the light fixtures need cleaning in the hall," Clara adds, sliding onto the kitchen stool. I swivel to face her.

"Feel free to get started on that at any point." My voice is brittle, and she pulls out a fucking nail file as though she's on holiday, and not at work.

"Silas said—,"

"*I don't give a fuck what Silas said*," I hiss into the stone. Silas can throw himself off a cliff for all I care right now. Not that I'd have the energy to celebrate it.

I'd still manage to wave a little flag though. Even if it killed me.

Fuck, even my fingernails hurt.

How is that possible?

Sighing, I rinse out the cloth in the bucket next to me. The hearth is done.

Now I just have the washing. The beds. The windows.

Oh, and apparently the damn light fittings, too.

Maybe then I can eat. And *sleep.*

"Isn't it time for you to leave?" I ask Clara tartly. Thank fuck she doesn't live in the house. It's been dark for hours. She should have left already.

She bats her long fucking eyelashes at me. "Rafe asked me to stay for dinner."

The words take a minute to process. And then I spin, picking up the washing and walking out, ignoring her words completely.

It doesn't matter.

It *doesn't.*

I don't know why it even hurts, that he would ask her to stay. Not when he makes my life hell in every other way he possibly can.

I'm very aware of just how much these men don't give a flying fuck about me anymore. The more time I spend here, the more I wonder if they ever did at all. I was clearly a fucking deluded fifteen-year-old girl.

After putting the washing on, I scrub as much of the dirt from my arms and hands as I can before gingerly picking up the clean bedding.

I did not plan this well. But since I don't care if they get a little filth with their sleeping arrangements, I'm not particularly careful as I make my way upstairs. I have to pause for a rest in the hallway, and I use it as an excuse to admire the gleaming floors. Courtesy of *me*.

Although I have no doubt they'll be covered in something vile again by the time morning comes. Rafe is very dedicated to his work. Hasn't missed a day yet.

By the time I make it upstairs to his bedroom, I'm huffing. I've had no time to sit and have lunch. Or dinner. Again.

And I'm so focused on the growling in my stomach that I don't pay any attention before barging in, assuming that he'll already be downstairs, waiting for his undoubtedly delicious dinner. With *Clara*.

"Dickhead," I hiss to myself.

And then I stop, pulling myself up a few steps into the room as the door swings closed behind me. Staring, as Rafe turns around with a jerk, his eyes flaring in surprise.

Water makes its way down his chest as he rubs the towel over his hair, pausing as he takes me in. My eyes drop down without my fucking permission, taking in the golden expanse of skin, lightly dusted with hair. The tattoo winding down his right side.

Lower.

Choking, I slap my hands over my traitorous eyes and spin around as he curses, wrapping the towel around his waist.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" His voice is a snap behind me. Too close.

"Bedding," I choke out in explanation. I toss the pile to the floor behind me blindly and reach for the door handle. "I'll come back."

Later. Much later.

In fact, he can change his own fucking bed, Silas and his orders be damned.

But a hand wraps around my wrist, circling it gently and stopping me from leaving. With a nudge, he turns me around. Rafe leans over me, his green eyes piercing as he scans my face. I swallow.

"Anastasia." His voice is a purr. "It's damn rude to walk into other people's bedrooms without asking, you know."

I take a breath. And then another, trying to force the citrusy scent of him from my lungs as he presses into me.

"I wouldn't know," I breathe quietly. "Since I don't actually have a bedroom."

His lips lift. "Maybe you'd like to share one. I'm sure we can work something out."

It takes a second for the words to sink in. For them to wash over me like freezing cold water, dousing the heat flickering to life in my abdomen.

My breath catches, and Rafe's eyes widen. "I didn't mean—,"

I shove him back. "Yes, you did."

"*Wait*." He grabs my hand again. "I didn't mean that. I'm sorry."

The back of my throat burns. I can't even look at him.

"So you didn't just insinuate that I could fuck you for a decent night's sleep?"

He pales, the golden hue of his skin turning waxy. "Fuck, Stasi. I was just—."

"Just playing," I force out through cold lips. "Is that it?"

For once, he doesn't seem to have any words. Instead, he watches me. Too closely. My eyes prick as I turn away, towards the door. He doesn't stop me this time.

"If I get on my knees and suck," I say quietly, "Can I swap it for some proper food? Because I'm getting really *sick* of porridge and broth."

He sucks in a breath as though I've hit him.

Except I'm the one who's just been slapped. With a cold, hard dose of reality.

The tears blur my vision, my head buzzing as I slip out, leaving the bedding behind on the floor.

Ellen barely glances up as I walk into the kitchen. The tears are already dry on my cheeks as I head over to check on the washing. "You haven't had dinner yet."

"I'm not hungry." I've lost any sense of appetite, thanks to Rafe.

I'm just their entertainment. Someone to poke at, like a bear in a cage. And when they get bored – which they will, eventually – they'll just throw me away. Back to my shitty prison cell, with Parrish.

It hurts. My chest *hurts*. And I'm so damn cold, all of a sudden.

Ellen glances at me, concern flickering. I'm *always* hungry. I learned a long time ago not to turn down food. But the thought of eating right now makes my stomach flip.

But she doesn't press. "Can you help me carry the plates up?"

I hesitate. The last thing I want to do is go anywhere near the dining room.

But that's it, isn't it?

I don't get a choice.

Silently, I pick up the plates and follow her. The cold is expanding in my stomach, heavy and numbing. Blissfully numbing. And I embrace it, opening myself up to let it fill me, starting with my feet and working upwards.

I don't want to *feel* anymore. What's the point?

I feel Rafe's eyes on my face as soon as I walk in. His hair is scraped back, damp and styled as he sits next to a beaming Clara. She titters, leaning in and making sure she presses her breasts into his arm as she whispers something in his ear.

And yet I don't feel anything.

I look away, accidentally locking eyes with Kit. The violet darkens, a frown crossing his face as he examines me. "Stasi? Are you… alright?"

Everyone goes silent as his words carry across the room. Even Ellen twists to look at me, frowning. "Anastasia?"

"Nothing," I say tonelessly. I set his plate down in front of him. "I'm fine."

Rafe leans forward. "Anastasia."

I slide my eyes to him. "Can I get you something?"

He flinches. Clara's smile drops away from her face as her eyes move between us. Silas straightens. "Somebody explain what's going on."

"Nothing," I repeat again.

Silas focuses on my face, and he pauses. His deep blue eyes flicker over me. Once, twice. Again. "Are you sure?"

I don't know what they're seeing on my face, but I try my best to wipe it away, wanting them all to stop *looking*.

Maybe an apology will help. "Sorry."

Rafe jerks. Silas frowns. "What are you sorry for?"

Existing.

Instead, I shrug. I stay silent and stare at the floor, as Ellen serves the food to the silent table. She places a hand on my arm, and I jump, looking up from the ground.

"Come on," she says. Her voice softer than it normally is. "Let's get you something to eat, shall we? Breakfast was a long time ago. You'll feel better."

"She hasn't had lunch?" Silas's voice.

Ellen straightens. Her voice carries, unusually cutting. "When would she have time?"

I should be surprised that she's standing up for me, but I can't seem to muster anything beyond the creeping numbness invading my body. I follow her down to the kitchen, where she cuts up a piece of the pie she's just served upstairs.

I stare down at it. "I'm not allowed to eat that."

Even my voice sounds dull. Ellen puts her hands on the table. "What happened?"

"Nothing." I pick up the fork, but my appetite is non-existent, even with something that isn't *broth* in front of me.

And I didn't even have to get on my knees for it.

I push the plate away. "I should get back to work."

But Ellen's hand lands on my shoulder.

"No more work tonight, Stasi," she says gently. "How about a shower? Head on up and I'll make you a hot drink."

But I shake my head, sliding off the chair. "No, thank you. I'll… finish this later."

And I go back to work.

17 – Kit

"*What the fuck did you do*?"

Clara startles as I roar the words across the table. She shouldn't even fucking *be* here, but for Rafe and his relentless campaign to wind Anastasia up in any way he can.

My ire is firmly focused on my twin. He can barely meet my eyes, and I *know*.

Whatever this is, whatever has put that *look* on Stasi's face, empty and numb as though the personality has been sucked out of her – it's his fucking fault. I'm certain of it in the way that only a twin can be. He's guilty as fuck. And for Rafe to feel guilty, whatever happened has to have been fucking bad.

I turn to Clara. "Leave. Now."

She sucks in a shocked breath, glancing to Rafe beside her. But he doesn't even meet her eye, staring into his glass. "Apologies, Clara."

She tries to smile, then, although the disappointment on her face is plain to see. "Perhaps another night."

Rafe sighs, tipping up his glass and swallowing the last of his wine with a gulp. "I don't think so. I'm sorry to have wasted your time."

She jerks, and I hold my tongue as she gets to her feet. She snatches her bag up, stalking to the door and slamming it behind her.

Silas glances after her as she leaves. "We'll need to hire someone else."

"Why bother?" I say shortly. "When you've got a fucking slave working herself to death downstairs?"

Silas grunts. "Don't be so damn dramatic, Kit."

But he doesn't sound as confident in his grand plan as he did a few weeks ago. His eyes slide towards the closed door.

"You saw it too," I push. Something's not right with Anastasia.

Silas hesitates. And then he gets up. "I'm going to check on her."

Before he leaves, he looks across the table to Rafe. My twin looks fucking miserable. "Out with it, Rafael. What happened?"

He groans, rubbing a hand down his face. "She walked into my room without knocking. I'd just finished in the shower."

My whole body locks up. Silas freezes. "And?"

Even his voice is ice cold. Rafe winces.

"I might have…" He swallows. "I made a joke. About her sharing my bed. And she took it… badly."

I stare at him. Even Silas seems struck silent.

"Because she doesn't have a fucking bed of her own," I say finally. My voice feels hoarse. "Because she's sleeping on a rock-solid floor every night, and you insinuated that she could – what? Earn more by *fucking* you?"

He snarls at me. "I didn't mean it like that!"

"How did you mean it, then?" Even Silas sounds on the edge of violence as we watch him in disbelief.

"It was a fucking joke," Rafe snaps. "And I feel shitty about it."

"What did she say?" Silas asks abruptly. "When you said it?"

We both wait. Rafe doesn't meet our eyes as he takes a breath.

"She said…" his voice wavers. "She asked if she could have a better meal if she got on her knees for it. Not that – she didn't *mean* it."

Fucking hell. Fucking *hell*.

"No," Silas says coldly. "I understand exactly why she said that."

But my anger is rising, encompassing everyone in this fucking room. Including myself. "Are you happy now, Silas?"

He jerks. "What?"

"I told you," I force out through the grip tightening around my throat. "I said that this would break her. And I was right."

Because she's *broken*. Something inside of her has gone out. Like a candle's been blown out, the flame stuttering before it extinguishes completely.

"We need to fix this," I breathe, my eyes on his. "Silas. You need to fix this. Fix her."

His head jerks back. "How exactly am I supposed to do that?"

I snap. They're so fucking obtuse. "If you can't work that out, then she can't be here."

Both of them freeze.

"She can't go back there," Rafe says quickly. "Don't be stupid, Kit."

Back to a prison cell. Back to where some fucker called *Parrish* can get his hands on her.

"At this point," I say quietly, "I'm not convinced that being here is better for her. I wonder if it's worse, if all we're going to do is fuck with her head."

I look at Silas. "You *know* it doesn't have to be like this. Let her serve out her damn sentence without taking every opportunity to twist the knife a little more. You're torturing her for your own purposes."

And I won't stand for it anymore. Should never have let them treat her like that to begin with.

Then I turn to Rafe. To my twin. "And you… you're being an asshole, Rafe. Stop throwing crap all over the floor every damn night."

Silas crosses his arms as Rafe's jaw tightens. But my twin nods.

I glare at Silas. "*Fix her*."

It has to be him. Because despite Rafe's absolute stupidity, it's my eldest brother who's responsible. Who's the reason she's not eating properly, the reason she's sleeping on a hard floor every night.

And if he keeps up this relentless punishment, we might not get Stasi back at all.

That's not something I can live with. And despite their fucking idiocy… I don't think they could live with it either.

18 — Silas

Fix this.

Fix *her*.

As I descend the steps to the kitchen, my feet are unusually hesitant.

Uncertain.

I'm sure she's fine.

I brace myself for what I might find, but only Ellen turns my way, her mouth opening in surprise.

Pausing, I swivel my head like an idiot. Looking for her. But the rest of the room is empty.

"Where is she?" I demand.

Our housekeeper's mouth firms in a way I've rarely seen. "I'm not going to let you berate her, Silas. She's not… she's not well tonight."

The concern in her words makes my stomach roil. "She's sick?"

Ellen stares at me until I feel the childish urge to shift beneath her silent judgement. "Sick in the heart, I would suggest," she says finally. Quietly.

Condemning me with her words.

Sick in the heart.

"Ellen," I say finally. "I'm… I just want to make sure she's alright."

She still looks hesitant. "Well. I was actually coming up to get you. Although perhaps Kit might be better."

I straighten, worry piercing through me. "Why?"

When she tells me, my eyes close for a moment. "I'll… I'll speak to her."

Jesus.

I make my way back up the steps, but my brothers have got to Anastasia first.

Kit turns to me, the worry clear on his brow as I reach the hallway. Rafe is holding onto the ladder, his tone pleading.

"Stasi." He swallows, his eyes flicking to mine. "Come down. Please."

Anastasia teeters on the very top step, wobbling as she stretches for the light.

She only shakes her head, and Kit swears softly as she tilts further. "I'm not done."

"Yes, you are." Kit moves to join Rafe, his hands spreading out as if readying to catch her. "Come down before you fall."

"Can't," she mutters. "Haven't finished the list."

Her hands reach for the light fitting again. It's not even within her reach. An impossible task—

I stop in my tracks.

The list.

The list that *I* made, despite knowing it was impossible to finish it all in one day, if at all. The list I made just to irritate her.

To twist the knife in a little more.

"Anastasia," my voice is low as I step up beside my brothers. "You're finished for tonight. Get down from there, right now."

She blinks, staring down at me. "But I haven't finished."

She looks so fucking tired. How did I miss how exhausted she is?

Because I didn't want to look at her.

And her voice sounds so small, so sad, that I have to close my eyes. Have to brace against the sudden, sharp stab in my chest.

Because *I did this*.

I wanted to hurt her. Wanted her to feel some of the pain that she put me through – put *them* through.

But I didn't want to break her. And maybe Kit was right after all. That's exactly what I might have done. Because this behavior, this quiet, pale Anastasia… it's not her. It's not *right*.

Fear tightens my throat. "I'm changing the list. Get down, and I'll tell you what you need to do."

When she immediately begins to climb down, my heart just about rips out of my chest.

I don't breathe until she's close enough for me to step forward. The twins fall back as I carefully place my hands on her waist and lift her down. She stares at my chest, not even looking up.

She feels breakable. Nothing like the strong Anastasia I used to know.

And her skin… it's *burning*. The heat works through the cotton of her shirt, and sudden understanding makes my fingers clench.

I rest my hand against her forehead. Take in her glassy eyes. "She's got a fucking temperature."

Kit tests it for himself. Curses violently. "I'm calling a doctor."

Rafe just stands silently, his face pale with shock as I lift her carefully into my arms. She doesn't look at me. Doesn't look at any of us as I take the stairs two at a time. I don't stop until I'm shoving open my bedroom door, placing her carefully down on my bed.

She starts to struggle. "'M not allowed."

"Fuck," Rafe whispers. We glance at each other before he reaches down, carefully capturing her hands in his. "Yes, you are, Stasi. You're staying here tonight."

She collapses back against the covers, her face damp. "I didn't finish the list."

Fuck the list.

But she twists, pulling it from the pocket of her black trousers, and my throat closes up as I carefully take it from her, opening it up to see lines upon lines of my fucking *orders*.

As though her whole life has narrowed to a list I came up with on a whim. To torture her.

That's exactly what it is, I realize abruptly. Day after day of cleaning and scrubbing and barely fucking *existing* with barely a moment to herself.

Kit was right. This isn't a punishment. This is fucking torture.

When he bursts through the door, Rafe and I look up. "The doctor – he's tied up. Something about that fucking virus doing the rounds. But he said it sounds like exhaustion. She needs to sleep it off."

"The temperature?" I ask hoarsely.

"We need to monitor it," he says. I watch as he leans over, carefully stroking the hair back from her face before checking her pulse. "But it should disappear, if it's only rest she needs."

I perch on the edge of the bed, my eyes on her face. "If it doesn't change, we're taking her to hospital."

Her eyes are already closing as we settle in around her, her body limp. Kit picks up her hand, cradling it between both of his, violet eyes flashing to us as if daring us to say a fucking word.

I don't say anything.

I watch, and I wait.

I don't take my eyes from her for a second.

19 — Stasi

I jerk awake in sudden, terrifying awareness.

I've overslept. *Shit.*

When I jolt upright, hands land on my shoulders and I jump a mile. "Stasi."

My hands clench in the… the cotton?

What?

The sleep clears from my eyes as I look down, taking in the soft material beneath my fingers.

Oh, God. It finally happened.

I've been toying with the idea of climbing into someone's bed for a nap for days, and I must have done it. And I've been caught.

My head turns slowly. Silas is sat in a chair next to me. He looks almost as tired as I feel.

"Sorry," I blurt out, but my voice is barely a croak. Coughing, I say it again, and he groans, rubbing a hand down his face.

"Stop apologizing. Please."

He leans forward, and I jerk as he presses a hand against my forehead. "What are you doing?"

"You had a fever." Slowly, he pulls his hand back. "We put you to bed. You've slept for a while. It's the middle of the afternoon."

Blinking, it takes me a few seconds to understand his words. Vague memories of the dinner table start to filter through. Clara. *Rafe*.

My stomach twists. "You… put me to bed. *Your* bed?"

When he nods, I know I'm dreaming.

The laugh bursts out of my chest, and he frowns at me, one eyebrow lifting in question.

"This is a dream," I mutter. "It's a dream, right?"

The frown just keeps getting bigger. "Why would you think that?"

"Because—,"

Because there's no way in hell Silas would *ever* put me to bed, even if I was ill. He'd probably just throw some cold water on me and tell me to get on with it.

I pull the covers off me with shaking fingers. “I’ll just… go.”

“Anastasia.” His hand covers mine, squeezing my fingers gently. “Stop. *Please*.”

His hand feels warm against my skin.

“And you said please,” I mutter in confusion. “Definitely a dream.”

He groans. “This is not a dream.”

Eyeing him in doubt, I reach for my wrist and pinch the skin.

Ow.

Slowly, I look up at Silas. “Not a dream.”

His lips press together in harsh lines. “No. That’s what I seem to keep repeating.”

The sarcastic words sound much more like the Silas I know, but I’m starting to feel as though I’m in some sort of alternate reality. I glance down, taking in the rumpled bedding.

“Well, I don’t seem to have a fever anymore. So I’m just going to go and… freshen up. And then I’ll get back to work. I’ll catch up on anything I’ve—,”

My eyes widen as his hand covers my mouth.

“Anastasia,” he snaps. “For the love of God. Stop talking. Stop moving. And *listen* to me. Do you understand?”

When he slowly pulls his hand away, I blink at him.

And then I nod.

He sighs. “I… I’m sorry.”

My eyes slide around the room, into the corners. There has to be a camera here. Some sort of set-up.

But Silas leans forward on his elbows, resting them on his knees. “The list I gave you. It wasn’t supposed to be…,”

He shakes his head as I stare at him. “It was a punishment,” he says hoarsely. “I wanted to – to hurt you. I was angry. But I never meant for it to go this far.”

I’m still fucking confused.

“Spit it out, Silas,” I whisper. “What are you talking about?”

“I made you ill.” His voice is low. “You’re not eating properly, not sleeping properly. Working your fingers to the fucking bone because of this *list*.”

He holds it up like evidence, and I glance at the spiky writing. My head begins to ache. “You’re giving me whiplash, Silas. That’s why I’m here, isn’t it? To work? To be *punished*? This is what *you* wanted.”

“Not like this,” he says quietly. “I don’t want… I don’t want anything to happen to you. Because of me. We can’t spend the next two decades like this, Stasi.”

We watch each other in silence. My heart thumps inside my chest.

“But you… you hate me.” My mutter drops into the space between us like a stone. “You’ve made that perfectly clear, Silas. Don’t try to tell me you don’t. I can see it in your face, even now.”

A myriad of emotions flash across his face. Yes, the anger is still there.

But there’s concern there, too. His hand shoots out as I struggle to prop myself up, sliding around my back, helping me keep my balance.

“Can you blame me for being angry?” His words are quiet, even as his fingers spread out, strong and sure across my back. “You don’t even know what your actions cost us that night, Anastasia.”

When I can focus, I turn to him.

“I was doing what I was told to do,” I say tiredly. “And in the end, I wasn’t going to do it, Silas. But when I asked you to help me, you threw me out like I was trash.”

He looks at me, grim and tired. “Maybe I was angry then, too.”

And look where it got us, in the end.

“Did you ever think that that night might have cost me something, too?” My small words send his eyes flying up to mine, even as they crease in confusion.

“What could it possibly have cost you?” His words are on the edge of disbelieving.

It’s on the tip of my tongue.

My family.

My future.

My freedom.

You.

But he doesn’t want to hear that. So I don’t say anything, and he sighs. “I’m… going to try to get past that night. But you still need to serve your sentence, Anastasia. This – right now - is about our own story. But it doesn’t change what’s happened with Ella.”

My eyes close. The hope I didn’t even realize I was holding onto shrivels inside my chest, curling up and blackening around the edges until it dissolves into ash.

How many more times before you learn, Stasi?

The words appear around the lump in my throat. "Of course. I wouldn't expect anything else."

Our history is not the only issue between us. Not with the whole world pressing in around the edges. Everyone wants their pound of flesh from me, and Silas volunteered to deliver it.

And Silas Tate never fails at anything.

He still believes that I'm the person *they* say I am, whatever his guilty conscience says.

A piece of paper is pressed into my palm, and my eyes open. "What's this?"

"A new list." Blue eyes pierce mine. "Hopefully a fairer one, you'll agree."

The chair creaks as he stands.

"Take today to rest," he says firmly. "Tomorrow, if you need it. Get well. And then… we'll try things this way."

Silas stops as he reaches the door, glancing back over his shoulder. "Can I… get you anything?"

He sounds awkward. Uncomfortable.

And as I stare down at my new list, I shake my head.

I can't look at him. Because if I do, then I might end up begging.

See me. See who I am, Silas. Please.

He used to know me better than anyone else.

Silas, Rafe, Kit. They were my everything, until I lost them.

But now… now the whole damn world is in our way. And maybe it's too late to find our way back to who we used to be.

The thought makes the ache in my chest deepen, so I focus on the list instead.

Breakfast. Lunch. Dinner. All outlined, with painstaking detail.

A new start and finish time, later in the morning and earlier in the day.

And… a *day off* on Sundays.

I thought he was gone, but his voice makes me jump. "You can go outside during your free time, if you wish. I trust you won't be running off anywhere. You know how isolated this estate is."

Where would I go?

I open my mouth. Lift my head, not sure whether to thank him or berate him for the patronizing tone of his voice.

But the click of the door softly closing is all that's left.

20 – Stasi

A new list.

A new beginning.

And this time, I don't have to sleep on the floor.

Ellen opens up the door to the small guest bedroom as I hover awkwardly behind her. Not my old room. That room is locked, and this one has little space for anything except the small bed and drawers, but it's more than enough.

And it's a hundred thousand times better than the stone kitchen floor.

"You're feeling better?" she asks, turning to me. Her pale eyes scan my face. "I was worried about you."

I click my tongue. "Ellen. You're not supposed to *like* your prisoners."

But I smile, and she smiles back. Just for a moment.

The days pass by, and I find my routine. Silas sticks to his word, and I cheer up immensely at my new, *vastly* improved diet.

"God, I missed bacon."

The bacon is hot and salty in my mouth. Groaning, I shove another piece in. Ellen purses her lips. "Don't eat it all at once, Anastasia. You'll give yourself a stomachache."

But she tips another piece onto my plate.

And as the days pass, I don't see the Tate brothers at all.

I'm not asked to serve at dinner, despite Clara's very obvious – and completely fucking welcome - absence. I stick to the common areas, making sure every inch is spotless and thanking my lucky stars that I don't have to change their bedding anymore.

I don't think I could cope with another offer from Rafe.

I haven't forgotten how he made me feel.

It sticks in my head. The longer I go without seeing him, without calling him out on it, the more irritated I get.

And the more determined I become. After all, revenge is a dish best served *cold.*

I owe him a little payback. For his words, and for the floor trick. Especially now I have the energy to think about it.

But I can't do anything until I see him.

And the more days that pass, the more it becomes clear that they're avoiding me. All three of them.

I should welcome the space.
I *should*.
But I still can’t stop myself from looking for them in every room I walk into.

21 — Rafe

"Going somewhere?"

My hand clenches around the handle of the front door. "I have some business to attend to in the city."

Back and forth. Leaving before dawn, not coming back until night has fallen over the house and I'm certain Anastasia is asleep.

Kit leans against the doorframe. "You can't avoid her forever, Rafe."

"Take your own advice, brother."

A dull flush crawls over his face, but he counters my accusation. "I'm not avoiding her. I've been looking into things."

Frowning, I let go of the door and give him my full attention. "What kind of things?"

In response, he tosses the newspaper in his hands at me. Unfolding it, I glance across the front page. "So, all is not well in the royal household."

"The staff are quitting in droves," he says quietly. "It doesn't quite fit with the picture of the poor, mistreated sister. Does it?"

My eyes take in the large photograph. Anastasia's stepsister is front and center. She's pretty enough, I suppose. Big blue eyes, although they look a little bulbous to me.

Nothing like the sleek, deep brown of Stasi's eyes.

She might not be the impossible standard of beauty that society holds up, but I'd take her quiet looks in a moment over her so-called sister.

The kind of beauty that creeps up on you, stealing your breath away. Strong and fierce and passionate, until it's all you can think about.

"Rafe?"

Jerking, I look up. The paper crumples beneath my grip. "You think she's lying."

Kit nods. "Silas refuses to believe it. But all the evidence is circumstantial. It just… it doesn't make sense to me. That's not the Anastasia we knew."

Perhaps not then.

"People change, Kit," I murmur, holding the paper out. "Just because we don't want to believe it doesn't make it wrong."

And I know he doesn't want to believe it. He still sees the Anastasia we once knew.

I toss the paper back to him. "You've always been the soft one."

My twin raises an eyebrow. "Tell that to the men."

I snort. The men under our command are more scared of Kit than Silas and I combined. "One little testicle removal and none of them will even look at you."

He grins. "It was a little more than that, if I recall."

The man in question was an abusive fucker, and we took great pleasure in removing him from our pool of associates when we found out that he was beating seven bells out of his wife at home. A useful warning to the others, too. Not to step out of line.

I cross my arms. "I still have to go. Call it avoidance all you like, but the work doesn't do itself, you know."

Silas oversees all of our business interests. Our family is richer than Croesus, thanks to a long history of savvy investing, and he inherited our father's skill. My twin prefers his music to the family business, but he gets involved when he needs to, cultivating his rather unfair reputation as the scariest Tate brother. The *shadow*, they call him behind his back.

Fucker.

But me? I'm the *face*. The point of contact for our men. And whilst it's quieter than normal, thanks to us reorganizing everything to make space for Anastasia, there are still a dozen demands on my time.

And if it's convenient that it keeps me out of her way, then that's just a bonus.

"She doesn't want to see me, Kit."

My words are quiet, and he sighs.

"This is not how it was supposed to be."

None of this is how it was supposed to be.

We should have been together. If she'd stayed. If she'd trusted us. But instead, she ran.

She broke Kit's heart. My twin become more withdrawn, more silent. Even his music room turned silent after she left.

And Silas. Silas turned cold, as though ice had spread from every place she'd ever touched him.

As I get into my car, switching on the engine, I catch my own reflection in the mirror. And I wonder what changes she pulled from me.

22 — Stasi

"Stasi."

I turn from where I'm wiping down the skirting boards. "Yes?"

Ellen looks a little ruffled, unusually so. "I wanted to get the silver downstairs into the kitchen so I can clean it. Could you help me carry it down?"

I blink. "Sure. I can help with that. All of it?"

There are at least three cupboards full. Ellen nods gratefully. "Would you?"

"Of course." Wiping off the last of the wood, I tuck the cloth into my basket and stand, stretching out the kinks in my neck. "I'll get the first lot now."

It's mid-morning. There's no reason for any of the Tate brothers to still be hanging around in the dining room.

But when I walk in, a pair of violet eyes lock with mine.

"Kit," I breathe. I haven't seen him since my little stint in Silas's bed. He straightens in his seat, eyes scanning me. It feels like he's inspecting me.

"Stasi." He smiles. "You're well?"

I nod, taking in the papers spread across the table with growing curiosity. "I don't want to disturb you."

He shakes his head. "You're not. Do whatever you need to."

Slowly, I move around him, feeling his eyes on my back as I reach into the first cupboard for the cutlery.

He breaks the silence. "Ellen's doing her spring cleaning, huh?"

Gathering up the spoons, I turn and place them down in the small amount of free space left on the table, at the other end to where he sits. "She is."

The papers are spread almost to where I'm standing, and I glance over one with mild interest. I haven't been given access to any news since I've been here.

My attention snags on the photograph of Ella.

"You can look." Kit's voice is soft. "If you want to."

"I…," Curious, I take him at his word and draw the page towards me.

The words jump out as I scan them, and my eyebrows raise before I can stop myself, a small laugh slipping out. Kit's eyes

are focused on my face when I glance up.

"Would you know anything about that?" He points to the words in my hand.

Swallowing, I drop it as if it's on fire and spin back to the cupboard, grabbing blindly for the first thing I can reach. "Why would I?"

"Stasi." His voice is firmer now. My shoulders tighten as I feel him moving closer. Tanned hands wrap around mine as he takes the set of bowls from me.

He's so close.

"You don't need to help," I whisper. "I've got it."

But he doesn't move.

"It's curious," he murmurs.

The words brush against my neck, making me shiver. "What is?"

He hums, and I swear I can feel the vibration, feel it soak into me as he moves a little closer. His lips almost brush my ear. "That your sister seems to be losing staff by the dozen. Seems they don't want to work for our precious, supposedly sugar-sweet princess. Any idea why that would be?"

I stiffen.

Pain. So much pain.

"No." My tone is abrupt, and Kit pauses. "And she's not my sister."

"I don't believe you." His words are blunt, and I take a breath. A deep one. My tone is dry when I respond.

"You're not the only one."

I duck out from under his arm, but he follows me around the table. "Tell me the truth, Stasi. I'm here, ready to listen."

I huff out a small laugh, picking up the cutlery and placing it into the bowls. "*Now* you're listening? How very kind of you, Kit."

"Stop that." I grip the silverware as he takes the other side. His eyes bore into mine, and I can't look at them as my hands are freed. He grabs them, stopping me from pulling away.

"In your statement," he says slowly, gripping my fingers. "You told the authorities that *Ella* was the one who made you do the work. That they had it the wrong way around."

I jerk my head up to look at him. "How did you get that? Those records weren't made public."

Undoubtedly at Ella's request.

His lips part, as if in confirmation. His eyes slowly widen as he stares at me. "It's true, isn't it? It wasn't you. It was *her*."

I can't do this.

I can't listen to the words I was so desperate to hear, for so long. From anyone.

But especially not from him. The backs of my eyes begin to burn.

"Does it matter?" I whisper. "Leave it alone, Kit."

His head jerks back as if I've hit him, his voice incredulous. "Does it matter? Of course it fucking matters. She's *lying*."

My throat aches. He's still holding onto my hands, refusing to let them go even as my eyes dampen.

"Do you know how long I waited," I murmur, "for someone to say that?"

He doesn't respond. But his hands tighten around mine as he waits. As if he'll wait forever.

"So many weeks," I say softly. "I sat in that cell, and I waited for them to realize. I spoke to everyone I could. I told them *everything*. And nobody listened to me. They stopped asking, then."

Jealousy, they called it. Trying to save my own skin, by throwing my sweet, abused sister under the bus. And how awful a person I must be, not to admit to it even after I'd been caught.

"Every word I spoke was twisted." The words feel sharp on my tongue. "Everything I said, they poked at and ripped apart."

Until I stopped talking altogether.

Because what was the point, when they were so convinced? The whole fucking *world* was convinced.

I was the villain, and she was a hero.

"Stasi," Kit breathes my name. He sounds… agonized. "We didn't know."

And how the words fucking hurt. They pierce the shield around my heart, jagged spikes driving in with force. *They didn't know.*

"They couldn't find a single character witness," I whisper. I can't look at him. "Did you know that? We moved around so much. I never got to know anyone well enough for them to risk speaking up for me."

The only people who might have spoken up for me, who knew me well enough to know that I would never have done that – was them.

They didn't know. But they fucking *should have*.

"I'm sorry." His voice is low. Pained. "If we had known – we would have—,"

Except he stops. Realizing.

"No, you wouldn't." And it hurts, still. "You had your chance to speak up, Kit. But you *didn't*."

They bought into the story just as much, if not *more*, than anybody else.

I study his hands. So strong, so sure. As if I could place my worries onto them, and he would carry them for me. But that's a lie.

"When you walked into the throne room that day," I say quietly. "I thought for a second that you might be there for me."

Kit closes his eyes. Swears under his breath. "Stasi…"

Because he knows exactly what I'm saying. They weren't there for me. They were there to take me. To punish me, to twist the knife a little further. And how Ella would rejoice if she knew just how much that little plot twist in our lives would hurt me.

I pull my hands away from his. "So no. It doesn't matter, Kit. This conversation, whatever you think you've solved here – none of it matters because it doesn't *change* anything."

I'm still here. Still tied to this house, to them, forced to serve the men I once loved. To work my debt off, for a crime I didn't do.

For a crime that was done to *me*.

The whole world thinks I'm a monster, and even if Kit thinks he knows the truth, I know that Silas and Rafe won't believe it. All they have is my word, and a few newspaper articles.

And God knows that my word means nothing in this house. For that, I have nobody to blame but myself.

I swipe my hand over my eyes, brushing the dampness away. Tucking away the pain, pushing it down far enough for me to function. "I need to get this to Ellen. She's waiting."

But Kit's voice rings out as I tread heavily towards the door. "This isn't done, Stasi."

Hope is a delicate thing.

Like glass.

So delicate that once it shatters, it will never be the same again.

My hope has been shattered so many times that I can't even see the pieces anymore.

Except now, I don't *want* those pieces. I don't want to risk picking them up again. They hurt too much. Cutting, slicing, wounding.

And most of all… I don't want to be disappointed again. Especially by them.

I don't think I would survive it.

So I turn my back on the one person who might actually believe the truth.

And I walk out.

23 — Kit — ten years ago

The keys move beneath my fingers without any thought at all.

The melody pours out of me in a way that's never happened before. Notes tangle with each other until I can almost see them in the air, twisting, entwining.

This is perfect. So perfectly *her*.

"Kit?"

Shit.

I nearly trap my hand as I slam the fallboard down. "Stasi."

When I twist, she's right fucking there, watching me with those eyes that follow me into my dreams. Every night since she's arrived.

I've never felt so exhausted, and yet so *exhilarated*, as I have since Anastasia walked into this house. As though I've been waiting for her my entire life, to finally feel something.

Her brown eyes blink, and I take in the cotton pajamas she's wearing as she fiddles with the sleeves.

"Did I wake you?"

She shakes her head.

It's late. Later than I should be playing, but I couldn't help myself. I woke up from yet another dream of her, and I had to come down here and play, push the melody from inside my head out through my hands until it became real. Tangible.

Almost as real as the girl in front of me.

She pushes her hair away from her face, and my eyes flick to it.

"I've never seen you with your hair down."

She always has it tied back. She's always moving, always climbing, running, chasing, *laughing*. The only time I ever see her quiet is in those moments that belong to her and Silas, curled up on the floor of the upstairs hallway as though that space belongs solely to them.

Not that I'm jealous.

Not of Silas, and not of Rafe.

My twin, her partner in crime, in mischief.

My brothers are happier than I've ever seen them. As though we've found our missing piece, and it was her. She fits with them.

But she fits with me too.

Her cheeks darken. She reaches up as if to tie it back, and I jerk a hand out in a plea. "Don't."

Our eyes meet. "Leave it down," I breathe. "Please."

And slowly, her hand lowers. She shifts on her feet, and I follow her gaze. To the piano.

"Play for me, Kit?" Her voice is hoarse. "I can't sleep."

She moves towards me slowly, and I shift to make space for her on the stool as she slides in next to me. "Bad dreams?"

She nods, her movement jerky. "Make me forget."

I want to ask her about her dreams. I want to draw out her secrets and hoard them, banish them so they don't put those circles under her eyes, but I sense her reluctance to talk about them.

So instead, I raise the fallboard, revealing the keys.

And as I set my fingers to them, the black and white moving in perfect synchronicity beneath my hands, I show her myself instead.

As though I'm opening up my chest, offering it to her.

Here I am. Waiting for you.

I breathe in sharply as she lays her head against my shoulder, a note jarring as my fingers slip off a key. "Sorry."

"It's beautiful," she murmurs. "Did you write this?"

"For you."

My confession drops between us, as she lifts her head from my shoulder to look up at me. I glance down, taking in the light in her tawny gaze. "I wrote this for you."

I watch her face closely, even as my fingers dance across the keys for her. And it feels like a gut punch when a tear appears, sliding down her face as she drops her eyes to her lap.

I immediately lift my fingers from the keys, but her hands quickly press down over mine, even as she shakes her head with a tearful laugh.

"No. Ignore me. Keep going, Kit. This is… it's beautiful. And I want to remember it."

Slowly, I start back up again. "I'll play it for you any time you want me to."

So I play.

Hell, I'd play forever if she asked me to.

And Stasi rests her head back against my shoulder, warm and vibrant and *here*. Even as she feels like she's slipping through my fingers.

I don't ask.

And the tears… they don't stop.

24 — Kit

I jerk awake, thrashing and sweating against my bedsheets.

The image of Stasi's tears ingrained into my memories.

How many more times did she cry, when I wasn't there?

Ten years of dreaming of her, and it never gets any easier. But *this*, this recollection of our first night together in my music room, feels too real. Too painful to make closing my eyes easier.

So I slip from my bedroom, heading downstairs and pushing open the door.

Even here, I can see her. See her sat on the stool in front of my piano. See her leaning over the instrument, see her dancing around it.

Th ghosts of our past surround me. Each one a painful reminder of how far away we are from the future I once dared to dream about.

Anastasia is built into every part of who I am. I wonder if she even realizes how much she shaped the person I am today.

Through her laughter, and her joy.

Through her smile.

And through her absence.

I slowly walk over to the piano. My fingers trail over the keys.

"Kit."

I whirl at the soft whisper, unsure if I'm dreaming. A small silhouette is framed in the doorway, shadowed in the dim light.

She steps into the room, almost a replica of ten years ago.

But this Stasi is older. Her eyes look tired, weighted down from the time we've spent apart, and the toll of the last few months.

I'm tired, too. Tired of pretending that I haven't needed her here, every second that she *wasn't*.

Tired of pretending that I don't need her still.

She lifts one hand to rub at her arm. Uncertain, as she glances around. "I'm sorry to disturb you."

"You have never disturbed me." I let the words go, let them float across the room to her. "Except when you weren't here."

She takes a breath. "Kit."

"Why did you leave me, Stasi?"

I have never asked her outright. But I'm done with dancing around this. Around us.

I need to know if the suspicion building in my chest is right.

And if it is… then I might need to face the fact that instead of pretending to hate her all these years, I should have been loving her. She should have been here, with us.

And while my brothers and I were wallowing in our misery and grief, she… she was *suffering*.

So much wasted time.

She yanks down the sleeve of her shirt, her fingers toying with the dark material as if for comfort. "You know why."

"No," I say softly. I take a step closer. Another, until I'm right in front of her, lifting her chin up. "I know what I was told. But I have never heard it from you. So I'll ask you again, Anastasia. Why did you leave me?"

Her eyes look close to black in the darkness. I switched on no lights as I entered. Only the small lamp from the hallway throws out any light, casting shadows onto her face.

"Tell me," I breathe. My forehead drops, resting against hers. "I'll get to my knees and beg if I have to, Stasi. Fuck knows I have plenty of other things to atone for."

Her breath hitches beneath my hands.

And slowly, the words come out. First in haltering, almost soundless sentences, before she finds her stride.

And the longer she talks, the colder my heart becomes inside my chest. Twisting, squeezing as I learn the truth of that day.

Finally, her hands come up to cover mine. "I know what you're thinking," she breathes. Her eyes widen as she stares at me. "But it wasn't his fault, Kit. Don't be angry. He was doing what he thought was right. And… I'm sorry. I'm so *sorry*."

That's a discussion that will wait. Not for long, not with the anger threatening to restrict my lungs, curling around my heart in pulsing, furious beats.

But not for tonight. Not with Stasi finally in my arms, the truth laid bare between us.

"That's it?" I ask her, hardly daring to breathe. "There's nothing else?"

My thumb strokes along her cheekbone as she shakes her head. "That's it. But I'm so sorry, Kit. I didn't mean to lie to you. But she was my *mother*."

My eyes slide closed. That's it.

Angelica. It always came back to Angelica.

"Good," I murmur.

And then I tilt her head back, her lips parting, and I press my mouth against hers. Sliding one hand to cup the back of her head, I drag her into me, breathe her in the way I've waited to do for too fucking long.

She gasps into my mouth and I swallow it down, swallow every noise she makes as she sinks into me, pliant and soft and fucking perfection in my arms. Like she was always meant to be there, the way I always knew she was, even when she was gone.

I move my lips from hers. Pressing kisses across the soft skin of her cheek, tasting the silky, sweet notes of her neck.

Learning her.

"I waited ten years for you," I whisper into her skin. "And I would have waited forever, Stasi."

Her eyes are wet when I pull back. Wet and full of stars.

Reverently, I stroke my thumb along her cheek. She's shaking beneath my touch. "Stasi."

"Kit."

Her face twists, her body drooping as though the weight on her shoulders is too much. "*Kit*."

And I catch her, as her legs crumple. I sink to my knees with her held tightly in my arms.

"I've got you." My throat feels thick as she buries her face in my chest, as her shoulders shake with tears. "And I'll never let go. Never again, Stasi. I swear to you."

Shifting, I maneuver us until she's nestled in my lap, her arms tight around my neck. And I hold her, my hands stroking through her hair as she sobs into my skin, her tears soaking us both and sending bolts of pain ripping through my chest.

I'll hold her forever, if that's what it takes to make this right.

But I can't go back and change things. Not the night she left.

Not the time she spent apart from us.

All I can do right now is hold on.

So that's what I do.

25 — Stasi

Kit's violet eyes are the first thing I see when I wake.

Stirring, I stretch out, drowsy and warm as I breathe him in.

He *knows*. Knows what happened the night I left. Knows about Ella, even if he doesn't have all of the sordid details.

And he's looking at me as if I'm his sole reason for existing. The emotion locks in my throat, threatening more tears even though I don't think I have any more left inside me.

His arms are still tight around me, even as edges of morning light glow from behind the heavy scarlet curtains. "What time is it?"

"Early." He presses his lips against my hair. "Don't go yet. Please."

It's the quiet, gentle plea that makes me turn to him. "Kit… what happens now?"

He sighs. At some point during the night he moved us, bracing his back against the wall opposite his piano, holding me as I cried out ten years of pain into his skin. I lean my face against his chest, listening to the beat of his heart.

"I think we need to speak to Rafe and Silas."

Every relaxed muscle locks up. "*No*."

The rejection is instant, almost without thought. Kit scowls as he looks down at me. "Why not? You can't carry on like this, Stasi. It's not right. If they knew, things would be different. Here, at least."

"Because…," I struggle, trying to find the right words to explain. "You asked me for the truth, and I gave it. But… they haven't *asked*, Kit."

And they've given me no inclination that they think the truth is anything other than what my sister says it is. That they even care enough to look at another possibility, the way Kit has done. And Silas knows what happened the night I left. He *knows.*

But he hates me anyway.

Kit's brow furrows. "I think you should speak to them," he says finally. His voice is soft, reassuring as he pushes my hair away from my face. "But that's not my decision to make. I won't force another choice on you."

I blow out a breath of relief. "Thank you. I don't… I don't want you to have to lie to them. Maybe… just don't say anything? For now?"

I glance up at him hopefully, and his lips tilt up. "It's going to be very hard not to mention you."

"Why- *oh*!"

His lips descend on mine, his hand sliding up to tangle in my hair. I'm breathless when he finally pulls back, and I stare up at him. "So this…,"

His hand tightens, just the smallest amount. "I have a lot of making up to do."

He kisses me again. "Making up?" I mumble against his lips.

"Mmm." He moves to my neck, small, gentle bites against my skin that nearly make my eyes roll back as his tongue traces a slow, tortuous line up to my ear. "Ten years of making up to do."

And as I pull back, I see his face. The pain he tries to hide. Cupping his cheeks, I force him to look at me. "I don't blame you, Kit. You didn't know."

His mouth firms. "I should have known better. I should have come for you. There's no excuse."

My heart swoops inside my chest. I cup his cheek, my finger tracing the dark stubble creeping over his skin. Drinking him in, his violet eyes liquid and lazy as he does the same to me.

"We're here now," I whisper. "Don't waste any more time torturing yourself, Kit."

He doesn't answer. But he distracts me with his lips, enough that my mouth feels swollen and rumpled when we sneak out of the room an hour later, his hand wrapped tightly around mine.

"This could be fun," I breathe, when he presses me into my bedroom door and glances over his shoulder. "Sneaking around."

When I wiggle my eyebrows, he groans. "Don't tempt me. I don't agree with this plan."

But it's my choice, and he's letting me make it. He tips up my chin, and I let my hands wander up his bare chest, my nail scraping over his nipple until he hisses and pulls himself away.

"Anastasia." His voice turns heated. "Don't make me push that door open."

Swallowing, I drop my hand. Maybe I'm not ready for that quite yet.

He presses a final, sweet kiss to my forehead.

"I have missed you every day," he murmurs, stepping back. He rubs a hand over his face. "Get inside, unless you want somebody to see us. Rafe has been getting up early to head into the city."

He doesn't sound disappointed at the thought. My eyes roll, but I give him a little wave and duck inside, pressing the door closed behind me. My forehead thumps into the wood, even as I brush my fingers across my mouth.

I want more of him. Want to spend hours exploring his skin, learning every part of him. My entire body flushes a deep red.

"Get to work, Anastasia," I mutter.

Turning with a sigh, I'm heading over to the drawers when I catch sight of the bucket in the corner. I've been keeping it close, waiting for the right moment. And then I pause.

Replaying Kit's words in my head.

Rafe has been getting up early to head into the city.

Slowly, the smile spreads across my face.

Payback's gonna be a *bitch,* Rafael Tate.

I don't waste any time. I fly down the steps to the kitchen, praying Ellen isn't already awake and letting out a breath of relief when I see it empty.

I know exactly what I'm looking for.

A dozen eggs, hastily cracked, go in first. Then the flour. I send a mental apology to Ellen as I grab the big bag she uses to bake with, tipping slowly until a huge clump falls out and I'm enveloped in a white cloud of dust.

Coughing, I grab the spoon and stir until it's a clunky, lumpy mess.

I just need one more thing.

When I'm done, I can't help whistling as I carry my precious cargo up the stairs and into the hall. I'm going to spend the whole damn day cleaning up this mess, and it'll be worth every second for the look on his face.

I fly up the stepladder, carefully balancing the bucket over the door. If I get this wrong, it'll just hit the floor. I close one eye and try to measure as best I can, until I hear the thick tread of shoes above my head.

Close enough. I hope.

Sliding down, I push the ladder out of the way and step back, crossing my arms.

I want a front fucking page *ticket* to this show.

I want Rafe to know it was me, to see the satisfaction on my face as he gets a little taste of his own medicine.

And I want a sincere apology. But since one doesn't seem to be forthcoming, this will have to do.

My hand slips into my pocket, grasping the bottle I grabbed on my way out. Not something I had to clean up, unlike the contents of the bucket. This little addition is all of my own choosing.

Adrenaline surges through my veins as the footsteps get louder. I bounce lightly on my feet, pulling the bottle out and getting ready, flicking the lid off.

Ready.

The footsteps thunder down the stairs.

The excited whoop erupts out of me as the door opens and the bucket flips, crashing down to land perfectly over Rafe's head.

Perfect fucking shot.

I'm feeling pretty pleased with myself as a yell echoes from under the bucket. Pale yellow gooey sludge oozes out, dripping down all over his fancy suit jacket and spattering his leather shoes too.

Grinning, I squeeze the ketchup in my hand, watching in glee as it makes a perfect arc to spatter against his chest.

"How are you liking that little taste of karma, Rafael?" I call smugly. I take a step closer, flicking the bucket with my nails as an enraged growl curls out.

"I," I say softly, "am nobody's whore, Rafe."

It feels fucking *good*.

Right up until I hear another set of footsteps pounding down the stairs. Until the moment that a pair of bright green eyes meet mine, widening in confusion as he looks between me and the bucket. "What the hell is going on?"

The breath whooshes from my lungs. I jerk my head frantically from Rafe to the bucket.

It appears to be… snarling.

"Um," I whisper. "Kit?"

Please be Kit.

Please.

I *cannot* be that fucking unlucky.

Rafe claps a hand over his face as I stare at him. He chokes. "This… this was for me?"

And then he bends over, slamming his hands onto his knees as he gasps for breath amongst his laughter.

"Genius," he wheezes. "If only you got the right person."

The person I did get is now struggling to lift the bucket from his head. Swallowing, I take a step back.

And another.

As Silas rips the bucket from his head, throwing it to the side with a large bang. His indigo eyes snap to mine, and if I thought he was angry with me before…

Shit. *Shitshitshitshit.*

Slowly, I raise my hands.

"Silas," I say placatingly. Maybe a little pleading in there too. "I… I thought you were Rafe."

Rafe is clutching his stomach, but he manages to snap his mouth shut when Silas swivels his head to glare at him.

When he turns to me, his fists clenching, my gulp is audible.

The egg and flour mix with the oats as they slide down his face, sticky lumpy trails that are going to be really hard to get off.

Possibly impossible.

I press my lips together, hard. Silas doesn't say anything.

The snort sets itself free. I can't stop it, can't do anything but slap my hand over my mouth. Both hands, as the laughter bubbles up in my throat. My whole body shakes as I try to keep it in and fail.

He just looks so *ridiculous.*

And even if Rafe deserved it… Silas deserves it too.

For that fucking list.

A large blob plops directly into his eye, ruining the evil glare he's pinning me with. Silas curses as he tries to scrape it off, and that's *it*.

I'm *gone*.

I didn't know it was possible to laugh this hard. Can't remember the last time I did. Tears of pure entertainment slip out as I wheeze. Rafe isn't much better. He reaches out to try and brush some of the mess off Silas's shoulder, shaking off his hand when it sticks.

His eyes meet mine, bright with amusement.

Just for a moment, it feels exactly like it used to. When we used to run through these halls together, playing harmless, childish tricks on each other, on Silas, Kit, on anyone we could.

And when our gazes clash, I know he feels it too.

My laughter finally trails off. His smile begins to dim.

And Silas *roars*.

I jump back, my hand flying to my throat as he raises a finger.

"Run," he breathes. "Run, Anastasia. Because if and when I fucking catch you, you won't be able to sit down for a damn *week*."

The heat rushes to my cheeks. "Did you just – threaten to *spank* me?"

Over my dead fucking body am I letting Silas Tate anywhere near my ass.

He bares his teeth at me. The rational Silas I know isn't anywhere to be seen as he snarls again. "*Run*."

Fucking hell. He looks really angry.

So I do exactly as he says.

I spin on my heel, and dash to the end of the hall.

Then I stop. Turn around.

And holding Silas's gaze, I slowly lift my middle finger in the air. And smile.

His mouth drops open.

Then I fucking run.

Down the hallway. Jumping down the steps. Into the kitchen. And through it, past the washroom and into the porch as I twist the handle with shaking hands.

It *opens.*

And I fly out into the bright, cool morning air with a grin, leaving a furious, sludge-covered Silas behind me.

I'll just… hang out outside for a while. Until he calms down.

26 — Silas

I stare after Anastasia's retreating back as the sludge slides down the back of my neck.

My suit is ruined.

My shirt. Probably my fucking shoes, too.

I whirl on a still-laughing Rafe. "Shut. Up."

But he's laughing too hard. "Your face," he gasps. "Sorry."

"This is your damn fault," I snap. "She was aiming for you."

He chokes. "She didn't look too sorry to have gotten you, though."

She will be sorry, by the time I get my fucking hands on her. I wasn't joking when I threatened to spank her infuriating, juvenile *ass*.

The heat builds up, the urge to follow her, to hunt her down. I don't know if I want to shake her… or kiss her.

That fucking *look* she gave me. Challenging, coy, edged with amusement.

I haven't seen that look on her face… since she came back.

Rafe snorts, and I scoop up a handful of the fucking gloop she managed to put together from the side of my face. I'm *covered* in it.

And my little brother… is not. I eye him.

"Seems a shame for you to miss out on your gift, *brother*."

And I shove it into his face, smearing it as he stumbles back with a curse.

The satisfied grin curls the edges of my mouth as he gapes at me, his face speckled with oats and egg. And then it grows, until the smallest sound of amusement escapes me.

At least, until he retaliates.

His hand lands in my hair, smearing the mess until I shove him off.

And then we're wrestling, jabbing and pulling, rolling around the damn floor as if we're little fucking kids again.

When we finally stop, I lay on my back, panting. Rafe does the same next to me. Stasi's mix covers both of us, head to toe. The floor. Flecks decorate the walls.

Possibly the curtains, too.

Rafe coughs out a laugh. “She’s going to kill us.”

I snort. “I’m not taking the blame for this. I was just caught in the fucking crossfire.”

The initial burst of anger drains away, and I drink in the moment.

We don’t have a lot of fun anymore.

Sighing, Rafe rolls to his feet and offers me a hand. “Yeah. I owe her an apology.”

“You think?”

“I thought she’d prefer that I keep my distance.” He stares after her. “I didn’t… didn’t want to make things any worse.”

“Good plan,” I say drily. I try to brush off some of the mix, but it sticks to my fingers and I shake them in disgust. “What the fuck did she put in this? Cement?”

I have to admire her ingenuity. Childish as fuck, but effective.

I’m still going to make her clean every inch of it, though.

It takes me more than an hour to scrub off the concoction in the shower, and when I jog down the kitchen steps, I’m expecting to see Stasi.

I check my watch. She should be here.

Ellen twists, a questioning look on her face. “Not here. I assumed you’d asked her to do something else.”

I did. I told her to run.

I wasn’t expecting her to actually fucking *run*, through.

I wave Ellen off, jogging to the door. “Anastasia!”

My bellow sends a flock of birds soaring from the trees, but there’s no sign of our wayward houseguest.

“*Stasi*!”

Nothing. Not that I can really blame her.

Swearing, I slam the door behind me and stalk towards the trees. She can’t be far.

But as I walk through the orchard, down towards the stream, I can’t find any trace of her anywhere. I retrace my steps, circling back on myself and searching through the thick trunks, my feet squelching in mounds of abandoned fruit that’s fallen from the trees around me.

And as the day crawls on, minutes turning into hours, the irritation starts to work its way back in. If she’s run from me – if she’s tried to use this as an opportunity to escape… I really will fucking spank her.

The thought sends a flicker of heat up my spine.

Where are you, Anastasia?

27 – Stasi

My feet are silent against the gravel as I take small, careful steps towards the back door.

This is fine. It's all going to be fine.

Silas will be irritated as hell, but he *did* tell me to run. I just… took him at his word. And if I spent the day climbing trees and wading in the icy cold stream, can he really tell me off if I was just doing exactly what he told me to do?

I bite my lip. I did hear him – or I thought I did – once. But he sounded so angry still that I figured it was best to climb up a little higher and wait.

Except then I fell asleep, full of apples and fresh air that went straight to my head. And now… it's late. Possibly *very* late, judging from the position of the moon above my head.

Oh, God. This is not going to be fine.

Bracing myself for uproar, my hand twists the handle quietly, and I slip into the dark house.

My clothes are soaked, and I drop my shoes to the floor quietly. I'm not looking ahead, so when the shadow detaches from the doorway and warm hands land on my face, I let out a startled squeak before I can stop myself.

"Jesus Christ," Kit chokes. He stares down into my face, his eyes travelling down to my soaked clothing. "Where have you *been*?"

Swallowing, I purse my lips. "Silas told me to run. So I ran. I just… forgot about the time."

Kit scans me, as if making sure that I'm in one piece before he responds, his voice wry. "I should have known. Silas is not in the best of moods, you know."

When I wince, amusement flits across his face, dampening the worry. "He searched for you all day. He looks almost as muddy as you do."

My hands reach up to cover his, soaking in his warmth as I start to shiver. "You are not helping my anxiety here."

He looked for me all day.

Probably with the chains in one hand, ready to lock me back up again.

He laughs, low and gruff, and his thumb rubs across my cheek. He pulls it back, showing me the dark smudge. "And why *are* you so wet?"

"Ah…" I glance down. I'm worse than when I first arrived, my hair full of leaves and twigs. But I feel alive. Like I needed

today, needed the air and the water to feel like myself again, like *Stasi*, and not just the Anastasia everyone keeps telling me I am.

"I slipped," I admit sheepishly. "On the bank of the stream."

"Of course you did." He reaches behind him, and my eyes light up when he hands me a large towel. "Here, you wild thing."

My grin stretches slowly across my face. "So, really. How much trouble am I in?"

Kit purses his lips. "He's waiting for you upstairs. I'll come with you."

The offer warms my stomach, even as I wrap the towel around my shoulders. But I shake my head in refusal. "No. I'll speak to him."

Kit crosses his arms. "*Anastasia*."

"*Kit*." I mimic his position, before I drop my hands. "I… it's fine. I can take it."

I'm not scared of Silas. He won't hurt me. At least, not physically.

But his tongue is fucking sharp. And I don't want Kit to see that, don't want him to feel like he has to take sides, like he has to choose between me and his brother.

And maybe… maybe he wouldn't choose me anyway.

He blows out a breath, and I let out one of my own as he leans forward, wrapping me in his arms. "I'm filthy."

"I don't care," he says roughly. "You don't trust me yet. Do you?"

I freeze, my body hardening against him. "What?"

"I get it," he says in a low voice. His hands rub up and down my back, and I close my eyes. "When you spend so long on your own, it's hard to rely on anyone else. And I haven't exactly given you any reason to believe that you can lean on me."

He steps back, and I glance down to where he holds my hand securely in his. Following it up, to where deep, dark violet eyes watch me closely.

"I told you I would wait forever for you," he says quietly. His thumb rubs over my skin, slow, comforting strokes. "And if it takes forever to prove to you that I'm not going anywhere, then I'll spend every day showing you, Stasi. You are not on your own. Not anymore."

My breath catches, as I watch him. My heart squeezing, my throat tightening up. With want.

Because I want what he's offering. *Desperately.*

But the good things that happen to me have a real habit of not lasting.

I'm not sure I could cope if it happened again.

"Come on," he says, his eyes tracing my face. "I won't stay, not if you don't want me to. But I'll take you in. And when you're done, come up and use my shower."

I swallow. "I have a bathroom now."

"I know," he says mildly. He leads me out of the kitchen, up the steps and towards the study that used to belong to William. When he knocks, heavy, *angry-sounding* footsteps echo.

Trepidation makes me stand a little taller, and Kit chooses that exact moment to lean down and whisper in my ear. "But I want you to stay with me."

The color floods my face as the door swings open. Silas ignores his brother completely, his blue eyes travelling over me. Assessing my soggy state, my chaotic nest of hair. The mud.

He looks like he's had more than a few falls himself today. The dark jeans he's wearing look a little damp, muddy patches at the knees, but his shirt clings wetly to him, covered in dirt and leaves.

I blink. He looks like he's only just walked back in through the door.

Kit sighs, and I jolt as he lifts up my hand. His lips press directly across the pulse in my wrist, and Silas scowls, but he doesn't say anything as Kit steps back.

"I'll see you later," Kit's words are pointed as he lets go of my hand, and I nod timidly, shifting from foot to foot as Silas steps back.

I slip past him, careful to leave a distance between us, and pad to the center of the room as Kit and Silas have a hissed conversation at the door. When it slams shut, I jump a mile.

Silas stalks over to me, and I shrink back as he leans over me with a snarl.

"Where were you?" he snaps. His hands land on my shoulders. "Fucking *Christ*, Stasi. Something could have happened to you, you idiot. Running off through the fucking woods like that."

I blink, taken off guard by the concern threaded through his words. "I thought you'd be angry."

The color in his face deepens to almost purple. "Do I not look *fucking furious enough* to you?"

I take a step back, frowning. "Not… not really, no."

I mean, he looks angry, but it's not the *cold* anger, the seething hatred that I'm almost used to seeing in his eyes. This is… worry. Worry like he wore when he carried me to his bed.

No, this anger is… *heated*.

He takes another step, crowding me until my back meets the wall. His head drops until our mouths are barely an inch apart,

our harsh breathing mingling in the small amount of space that he allows me.

He glances down. Even our bodies are pressed together, the damp clothing doing nothing at all to stop the heat from his chest burning against me.

"Silas," I breathe. I'm not sure why I say it, why it sounds like a fucking plea. But he watches me, and I suck in a breath as warm fingers slip around my wrists.

He pulls them up, slowly, until he's pushing my hands up above my head and against the wall, my chest pushing out towards him. "W-what are you doing?"

"Do you even realize what you do to me, Anastasia?" he rasps. I blink, slowly, as his face drops. Shiver, as his dark stubble brushes against the delicate skin of my neck.

"You defy me," his mouth brushes my ear, "at every fucking turn. You seem intent on fucking *tormenting* me. And all I want to do is punish you for it."

I wet my dry lips. "What would you call our present situation, exactly?"

When he pulls back and shakes his head, his lips brush against mine. I swallow, as one hand keeps my wrists above my head. The other slowly drops. Until he's curling it around my throat, his touch soft as the brush of silk even as his fingers close to a loose grip.

"Not that kind of punishment," he whispers into my mouth. "What I have in mind is much more… physical. Perhaps this one will actually get the message across."

My knees actually shake, my body tilting until he presses back against me.

And fuck, I can feel him. Heavy, and hot, and *hard* against my stomach.

And something… swoops. Low in my stomach.

Something needy. *Wanting.*

As if my body wants the man in front of me, the Tate brother who holds me in his hands like treasure but watches me like I'm poison.

This… this will not solve anything. Because he'll probably hate himself afterwards. And maybe I'll hate myself, too. For giving in to this… this need.

But maybe I'll regret it more if I don't. If I push him away now, if I see that cold look come over his face again.

Yes, I would regret it.

So I whisper the words.

"Do it."

28 — Stasi

He stills. His body stops, every movement ceasing as his eyes flick to mine. “Say that again.”

So I suck in a breath. “Punish me, Silas. However you want to.”

His eyes close, and I force myself to push out the words. “Do what you want. Just… just don’t *hate* me anymore.”

And when his eyes open, they look like an ocean storm. Dark and swirling, even as he presses his forehead to mine.

“Stasi,” he says roughly. “God fucking forgive me.”

And before I can take in the words, before the possible consequences of my permission have time to sink in, he turns me. One moment, I’m staring into his face, and the next, I’m pressed against the wall. He drags my hands down, slowly, pressing them against the cool wall until they’re level with my shoulders, my cheek pressed against the deep blue.

“Keep your hands there.”

I do as he says, my breathing shaky as he skates his hands down my back. Sliding down the wet black cotton of my shirt.

Lower.

My breath hitches as I feel him trace the sides of my hips, his touch soft. Too soft.

Almost… reverent.

He presses his face against my lower back. “Tell me to stop.”

It sounds like a plea.

But *this* Silas. This undone, heated, passionate part of him, this is the Silas that I want. Not the cold, angry, sarcastic man.

And I know that’s part of him too - the hurt, angry part, but the man in the room with me right now is the *real* Silas. And I’ll do whatever it takes to bring him back.

So instead of responding, I push myself back, pressing my chest against the wall and stepping back with my legs. Pushing into him. “No.”

I don’t know what I’m even asking for. But I jump when I feel the undeniable bite of teeth sink into my skin through my leggings. Silas pulls back, rubbing his thumb over the small sting.

“The things I want to do to you,” he says slowly. He doesn’t stop touching me, the sting changing to a burning heat that spreads across my body. “Fucking hell, Anastasia.”

“Tell me,” I whisper, and he pauses.

"I want to tie you up," he says slowly. "I want to take those fucking chains, and tie you to my fucking bed, where you can't get into trouble and I don't have to worry about you."

My breathing hitches at the thought. Not that I'm particularly keen to be back in chains, but the image burrows inside my head, lying there, spread for him as he walks towards me—

I swallow, hard. Well, *fuck.* "What else?"

His hand cups my ass. "I want to peel off these clothes, and I want to spread you across my lap and spank you until the only sound you can make is my fucking name. I want to open you up and look at that pretty cunt of yours and see what it looks like when my fingers are buried inside it."

My moan slips out, unbidden, dropping into the space between us. My pussy clenches like he's stroking it in time with his words, wetness spreading across my underwear.

I cry out when a finger presses against me, through the material. He pushes in, his fingers exploring me without apology as I press back against him.

"If I'd known this was an option," I choke out, "I would probably have taken this over the chores."

He pauses, then. "This isn't… I don't expect this from you."

And I know we're both thinking of the same thing.

"Don't worry," I breathe. "I expect to do my full complement of chores tomorrow, Silas. Just don't fucking *stop*."

I have no doubts that this will make things messy. But I still can't bring myself to stop him as he continues his slow, tortuous movement.

"When I'm finished fucking you with my fingers," he says in a low voice, "I'll spread you open for me, Anastasia. Hold you down as I push my cock into you, making you take every damn inch of it."

My legs shake, and he grips my hips. "I'd fuck myself into your skin," he says hoarsely, "Brand you with me until you can't breathe, can't move without remembering the feel of me *owning* you."

The desire, the possession, is clear in his words. I close my eyes, drinking them in.

This is Silas.

"You want to own me." My words are soft. "Don't you?"

He swears, low and violent. "I need to own you like I need fucking breath in my lungs, Stasi. I've spent ten years hunting you down, and now you're here and I'm scared I'll fucking *break* you with how much I need you."

Even all those years ago, he watched me with ownership in his eyes. Ownership that extended to his brothers, but to nobody else. He stole my words, my memories, my secrets, all of them, taking them and keeping them for himself in that little hallway. And I knew, knew from the way he watched me, from the way that they *all* watched me that I was theirs. Even at the age of fifteen, even though none of them laid a hand on me, we all knew.

There was never going to be anyone else for me, once I had them.

And when he realized that I was not *just* his – that my mother still had a claim on me – he lost me, through his temper and his rash actions.

Except now I'm back. And as his hands roam my body, cupping and touching as though every inch has been made for him, I know that he will never let me go again.

And I wonder who made the decision for my imprisonment to last for twenty years.

His admission sucks the air from my lungs, even as his hand pushes further, rubs at me until I stand on my tiptoes to try and escape the curling, growing heat inside me. But I want more, my body bucking as he holds me.

"Silas," I groan.

And my eyes fly open as he pulls away from me. "W-what—,"

But his hands are sinking into my leggings, dragging them down along with the basic black underwear Kit bought for me. They stick to my skin stubbornly, but he yanks at them until they drop to my ankles and I kick them off. They land with a wet thump, and I shiver in the cool air as his hands spread over the back of my thighs. "What happens now?"

Silence. I swallow hard as his hands move, pushing me apart.

"Now," he says softly. "Comes the punishment."

His hands abandon my skin, cool air dancing in his wake, and I crane my head around. My eyes widen when I see him wander over to the huge wooden desk. He takes a seat in the leather chair, his eyes on my body where I stand braced against the wall, my legs and pussy bared to his gaze.

When I shift, his voice rings out. "Don't move. I want to look at you, Anastasia."

The words wash over me, leave me breathless. "Look at me?"

"Mmm." He leans back in his chair. "I spent ten years without you. Now that I have you, I want to soak in the feeling for a while. Watch your greedy, wet little pussy as it twitches for me. And while I'm doing that, you can decide how many times I should spank your ass for driving me absolutely, irrevocably fucking *insane*. Today, and every other day that you haven't been right fucking *here*."

I only hesitate over the words for a split second. "It's not all *my* fault that I wasn't here."

Silence. Such deep silence that I bite my lip and squeeze my eyes shut, not wanting to look behind me. Finally, I suck it up and throw a quick glance over my shoulder.

Silas raises a dark eyebrow. "You done?"

I purse my lips. Consider it. Nod, slowly. "For now."

We have a reckoning coming, he and I. For that day.

But for now, I'll let him have this. Have me. Punish me, in whatever way he deems fit.

And hope that it'll banish that icy cold from his expression when he looks at me outside of this room.

"Good," he says silkily. "So consider what you feel *your* punishment should be, Anastasia. And perhaps we can discuss mine another time."

He sounds mildly disgruntled at the thought. But then, he doesn't know. He has no idea what happened to me after that day. On that day and every day after. For *years*.

I wait. Behind me, Silas shifts. I hear the rustle of papers. But when I glance over my shoulder, his eyes are pinned on me. Slowly, I push myself out. Spread my legs a little further. Revel in the hitch of his breath, even as my skin begins to heat again, just from the feel of his gaze on me.

"Ten," I murmur finally, and I feel his attention on me.

"Ten hits," he says, his voice musing. "I suppose I had better make them count, then."

When I turn, craning my head, he shifts back in his chair. And he pats his knee.

A short laugh escapes him when my eyes widen. "Come here, Anastasia."

Hesitantly, I let my hands slide away from the wall. The dampness of my palms has left a print against the paint, and I turn to Silas with an uncertain expression.

He holds out his hand, eyes burning. "I said, come here."

Slowly, I take a step. Another. And his eyes trace me, full of possession and fire as I walk towards him, my lower half completely bare.

He inhales sharply as I stop in front of him. "Fuck, you're beautiful."

The words warm my skin. But—

"You didn't say that before," I say quietly. Remembering the pain.

His eyes meet mine, and he lets me see it. The truth. "I didn't mean it. Not a fucking word."

He doesn't ask me again. He waits with his hand held out, waits for me to decide if I should take another step.

I know that if I turn my back now, he will never ask me again. And the distance between us will only get bigger, a void that neither of us will be willing to cross for fear of opening ourselves back up again. Only to be shut down.

My fingers shake as I reach out, wrapping them around his. Silas draws in a breath, and I wonder if I'm imagining the hitch. He draws me to his side. "Lie down. Face up."

My own breath catches.

And slowly, I turn, and I sit. My hands hold his leg for balance, strong and steady beneath me as I carefully lay myself down across his lap until my head hangs over the side, his legs spreading to hold me up. I can almost feel the rush of blood to my head, the dizziness of my position and Silas's hand sliding up my leg. I clear my throat, force out the words around the prickling need as he traces circles into my skin. "Shouldn't I be facing down?"

I feel… open. Exposed, as he stares down at me, his eyes tracing my slit. Taking in the wetness there. And I gasp as his finger traces a single line, barely brushing me.

"No," he says roughly. "I want you to watch me, Anastasia. And I want you to hold yourself open."

My eyes dart to his in shock. "What?"

He takes my hand in his, pushes it down to brush over my curls. "You heard me. Spread yourself for me. And count."

I feel lightheaded as I reach down, spreading my lips to his gaze. It warms in approval. "Good girl. Now count."

I barely have chance to draw in a fortifying breath before his hand draws back and slaps against my pussy.

Hard.

When I cry out at the sting, his other hand moves into my hair, tilting my face towards him. I stare up at him, gasping. "I said, *count*."

"One," I choke out.

"Again," he orders.

The slap rings out, and I suck in a breath. "*Two*."

Silas pauses, and I moan as his fingers circle my clit. "How are you finding your punishment?"

"Brutal," I gasp, and he smirks down at me, breathing hard.

"Good. Again."

By the fifth, I'm sobbing. Even the sound is obscene, wet and loud as Silas continues his work. I don't know if I'm about to cry or about to climax at the feel of his hands on me. My abdomen is clenching, hard, and my head throws back when another slap lands.

"Steady," he murmurs. His hand caresses the back of my head. "Taking it so fucking well, Anastasia."

"*Asshole*," I hiss when he does it again without warning, and he tugs my hair back in response. "Don't forget to count."

The eighth slap makes me clench, my body seeking something more. His hands on me aren't enough, and I buck my hips in frustration. "Silas, *please*."

"Do you want to come on my fingers, Stasi?" His voice is low and rough as he traces his fingers around where I need him to be. "If I fuck you with my hand, will you clench around me?"

"Try it," I force out with a gasp, "and find out."

He tuts, and I lift up my hips as he delivers another hit, right over my clit. My vision goes hazy, orbs of light dancing around me as I try to shift. "Nine."

"One more." It sounds more like a threat than a promise. I can barely breathe, the oxygen squeezing into my lungs not enough as Silas lifts up his hand and slaps it directly over my clit. In almost the same moment, his hand dips, two fingers pushing into me and *curling*.

I twist around his touch as the ripples of ecstasy overtake me. "Ten. *God*."

"Not God," he pulls out his hand and flicks my oversensitive clit. "*Silas*. Say *my* name when my fingers are buried in your cunt, Anastasia."

"Silas." It's a sob as he continues his assault, his fingers twisting and stretching inside me. I feel impossibly full, and a hazy thought works through my head. "*Silas*—,"

He pushes in further, and my body jerks at the small pinch of pain.

Silas is looking down at my pussy, at his hand buried inside me, and I try to breathe, try to relax. He pulls his fingers out, moving to rub my swollen clit.

"There." His voice is so smug, so fucking Silas, that I don't know whether I want to kiss him or slap him across the back of the head. "Such a good fucking girl, taking your punishment."

His eyes rake across my face, dropping down my body.

And I watch, as his expression changes. A crease appears between his eyes. And then… something else.

He lifts his fingers into the air, and we both stare.

At the smear of red.

Shit.

My whole face heats, and I keep my eyes away from his as I feel him turn to look at me. His legs tense beneath me. "Anastasia."

Nope. Not having that conversation.

Pursing my lips, I silently debate the possibility of just getting up and running out of the room. He might *not* catch me.

But he probably would. My legs feel like jelly.

Sighing, I lift my eyes to his. "Yes?"

He stares at me. Slowly, he holds his hand up. "Care to explain?"

"Explain what, exactly?"

Explain that I never had a hope in hell of meeting someone else with my mother and Ella in charge?

Or explain that I never wanted to meet anyone else anyway?

Neither of the two options sound particularly appealing, so I opt to just stay quiet, trying not to squirm as Silas rubs the blood between his fingers. His eyes narrow as he glances back down. "You've never had sex."

I clamp my mouth closed. At this stage, the seventh circle of hell couldn't persuade me to talk to him about this. He doesn't look like he's giving up, though, and after a minute I unclamp my lips enough to sigh. "This is really none of your business."

His other hand tightens on my leg, gripping it. "Like hell it isn't. You should have told me. *Before*."

Before he fucked me with his fingers like we were going for a damn world record?

"I can't remember an appropriate moment for me to volunteer that information. Not that you're entitled to it, in any case."

Awkwardly, I struggle to sit up, but he snares me with a hand around my waist. A finger tips my chin towards him.

"You're still a virgin," he says slowly. When I see the look in his eyes, my own roll, and I stagger to my feet. This time, he lets me go, even as his hands follow, holding my waist so I can't move more than a step away.

Possessive fucking *caveman*. "Try to hide your sheer delight at the idea."

Twisting, I turn to look down at him. He looks a little dazed. And a whole lot of smug. "Silas."

When he looks up at me, opening his mouth, I hold up my hand. "Do you still hate me?"

He blinks. "What?"

Slowly, I sweep a hand down my body, trying not to point to the obvious place. "Now that you've… worked it out of your system. Do you still hate me?"

Maybe I'm saying it wrong. Because he's staring at me like *I'm* the psychopath who enjoys the idea of taking someone's virginity by finger fucking them until they climax so hard their eyes roll back in their head.

"Anastasia," he says slowly. And then he stands.

I take a step back, ready to run, but his hands slide to my waist, stopping me from moving.

"Listen to me," he says shortly. "I could have ten lifetimes with you, and it would not be enough to work you out of my system."

Oh. My breath catches.

I swallow. "And the… and the hate? Strong dislike?"

"I never hated you," he says quietly. "I was devastated by you. There is a difference."

I was devastated by you.

I close my eyes. Take a breath. And then I reach out to him, with my words. Try to broach the distance between us that opened up on that night, and never closed.

"I'm sorry that I lied to you."

When I open them again, he's watching me. Slowly, I lift up my hands and cover his.

"I'm sorry," I say again. He doesn't respond, just watches me. But his hands still hold me tightly, so tightly but so *carefully* that a lump appears in my throat. "I'm sorry that I didn't tell you. What she was like. And I'm sorry that I didn't – that I didn't come to you first. Before I tried to- before all of that happened."

His hands flex on my waist. "Why didn't you?"

He sounds pained. "If you had – things would have been different."

I bite my lip. Try to explain. I've never *had* to before, never had to actually find the words and give them life by voicing them. And I struggle to find them now, despite the fact that I've had this conversation with Silas a thousand times over in my head.

Although I never imagined it quite like this.

"Because that was… it was what we did. We would stay somewhere, for a while. And then we would run. And I'd never – there was never anyone I cared about before. That I had to leave behind, I mean. And she was so – she was so awful, that day. I didn't know what to do."

I look down. "I was *scared*, Silas. I was scared that you wouldn't believe me. And I didn't want to see the look on your face when you realized what I was."

"A thief," he murmurs, and I nod stiffly.

"But I did change my mind," I say softly. "Even before you saw me. I was putting it all back."

I'll never forget the panic. Sheer, pulsing *panic* as I tried to find the right places for everything, to shove things back into the right pouches, the right drawers, before my mother came, before *anyone* came.

"I was coming to find you," I continue, my throat dry as I stare down at the floor between us. "But you… you found *me* first."

And then everything fell apart.

Silas sighs. "I came after you, you know."

My head snaps up. "What?"

His thumb massages my skin through my top. "After I – when the car pulled away. You were just out of sight, and I realized – I'd never run that *fast* before. No matter how angry I was, the idea of losing you was… it was impossible."

He laughs, soft and low and sad. "But I couldn't run fast enough. And when I got back—,"

His breath hitches, and I watch the emotions flicker over his face. Pain. So much pain.

"What happened?" I ask, my heart in my throat. My voice drops to the barest whisper, dread washing through me as my body tenses under his touch. "Silas?"

"Dad," he says quietly. His eyes flick to mine, and then away. As if he's reliving the words as they fall from his mouth.

"He pulled up in the car, just as I got back. And when I told him what had happened, he didn't believe me. So he ran up to his bedroom, but she'd already taken it. His wedding ring, and my mothers. Plus anything else she could get her hands on that was worth a damn."

My hand nearly rises up to my chest, but I hold onto it, stopping the movement. Hold it with everything I have, even as the guilt rips through me like a damn wrecking ball, tearing my soul to shreds. Again. Now is not the moment to make this about me. "I'm… I'm so sorry, Silas."

He shakes his head. "You didn't take it. It took me a long time to realize it. Not until after you got here, really."

I hold onto the words in my throat, waiting.

And Silas leans back. "And my dad… he *died*, Stasi."

The words sound wrong. So wrong and so abrupt, so final, that I shake my head, thinking I've misheard him.

"I don't – I don't understand."

"Broken heart syndrome." His hands drop from my waist. "That's what they call it. It can be caused by extreme emotions. And his heart just – it just gave out. Right there, in the doorway to his bedroom. And we couldn't save him. Me, Kit, Rafe – we all tried. And the twins didn't even know what had happened with you. Not yet."

I try to absorb what he's telling me. "William died. The night… the same night it happened?"

Silas nods. When he looks up at me, though, his face changes. Softens.

"Stasi. I didn't tell you so you could blame yourself."

Blame myself?

I try to breathe, try to take in some damn oxygen, but I can't.

They lost their *dad*. William. Lovely, funny, generous, *kind* William. Because of me, and my mother. Because we breezed into their home, in and out and taking anything we could with us on the way through.

How can I even compare what happened afterwards? When the loss in his eyes is my fucking fault?

They were right to blame me all along. If we hadn't come here… William might still be alive.

"God, we fucked up your lives," I breathe in horror. Silas's eyes widen as I step back, and his arms reach for me again. But I back away, my breathing speeding up.

I thought they were angry because I left.

I thought Silas was angry because of what he saw.

But this… this is so much worse.

You're alone.

Not a single soul will stand up for you, Anastasia Cooper.

And why would they?

For such an ugly, toxic person.

My hands start to shake as I turn away. I can't even look at him.

I never hated you.

I was devastated by you.

Truer words were never spoken. And all these years I was stupid enough to believe that I was a victim.

When it was just karma.

Silas half-stands, but I hold up my hand, offering him a weak, wobbly smile. "I… I'll leave you be, now."

He runs a hand through his hair, his brows drawing down. "Anastasia. You're not even dressed."

But I shake my head, the movement nearly throwing me off balance as I move towards the door. My hand reaches desperately for the handle.

"I'm so sorry, Silas." The words don't sound right. They don't sound enough. Not nearly enough, as he watches me with *concern* in his eyes.

Even that makes me feel sick.

"Don't run," he says quietly. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He doesn't ask me to stay.

I don't blame him.

I can't face Kit tonight. Not now that I know what I cost him.

Instead, I run for my little bedroom, not stopping until I'm under the covers. And then, only then, do I let the first, shuddering sob break free.

Another.

Another.

I cry for the boys I left, who loved their dad so fucking much and then lost him.

And I can't stop.

Because I was *right.*

Nothing good ever lasts. At least not when it happens to me.

29 — Stasi — ten years ago

"Anastasia?"

I jerk my head up, Silas twisting next to me as we both crane our heads to look down the hall. William pauses, his head moving between us as he emerges from the bedroom he shares with my mother. "Well. This looks… cosy."

"*Dad*." Silas sounds exasperated, and Williams laughs. He's *always* laughing, even though he looks more tired than usual, with dark circles beneath his eyes.

"Sorry," he says unabashedly. "Didn't mean to disturb you. But your mother is looking for you, Stasi."

I scramble up, dread already filling me at the thought of seeing her. "Did she say why?"

William shakes his head, and I notice the smart suit he's wearing. "She's not well, so she's staying behind this evening while I attend the gala. Perhaps she's missing you. It might be nice, to spend some time together."

There's an edge of *something* in his voice, even as he smiles at me easily enough. I don't think it's aimed at me.

I've heard the hissed arguments at night. We all have.

Every single one sends me into a panic. Silas doesn't understand. Rafe and Kit don't get it either, and I can't explain. Not without telling them everything.

They don't know how she works.

But I do. And I can see the signs a mile away.

The waning interest. The feigned excitement, even as her eyes grow dull and bored.

My mother is getting ready to move on.

And as I shuffle towards her bedroom, I pray that I'm wrong.

"Mother?" I call out as I push the door open. It's dark inside, and it takes a minute for my eyes to adjust to the gloom. The daylight is still fading into evening, but all the curtains are pulled tightly closed, blocking out any light from getting through.

"Anastasia? Close the door." My mother sounds groggy, and all I feel is relief. Maybe she's really sick, and not about to demolish the only good thing I've ever had.

But my relief is short-lived.

As soon as the click of the door sounds, the lamp next to her bed is switched on, and she sits up. Her hands beckon me. "Come here. *Closer*."

A lump appears in my throat as I gingerly pad over to the bed. "What's the matter?"

"Anastasia." She pats the bed. "Sit down."

Crossing my arms, I stay where I am. "Don't."

She doesn't try to lie to me. Instead, she sighs. "It's time, sweetheart. This is… not the life I expected."

My throat begins to prickle, the back of my eyes growing hot. "It's *never* what you expect. I'm tired of moving around. I like it here."

More than like it. This feels like *home*. Home, with Silas, with Kit, with Rafe.

My mother gives me a pitying look. "Oh, sweetheart. Those boys don't *care* about you. They're only humoring you. Why would they?"

She scans me with disinterest, missing the stab inflicted with her barb as I suck in a breath. "That's not true. And even if it was… I don't want to leave, mother. I want to stay here."

She waves her hand. "Don't be stupid. I can hardly leave you behind, Anastasia. Why on earth would they want to keep *you* without *me* being here?"

She laughs, a sharp, disbelieving bark, and for a moment, I hate her.

"Don't," I whisper. "Please, mother. William is a nice man."

She sniffs. "Perhaps to you. He barely even looks at me, anymore. I feel quite unwanted."

I glance towards the expensive jewelry on her dressing table. There's so much that there's little space for anything else. "He's not a stupid man. Maybe he's worked out what type of person you are."

"And what type is that?" my mother asks softly. Too softly.

I swallow down the fear.

I have to fight. For them. So I can stay.

"You're a user," I snap the words at her, and she blinks. "William has given you so much, and it's still not enough. It will *never* be enough for you. You won't find anyone better. Just… be happy with what you *have*. Please."

I wait for the barb to hit. Praying it gets through. We can't keep doing this. It feels like I start a new life every six months. A new life. A new name.

We've been here for a whole year. I thought… I thought this was it.

But any hope I have is snuffed out when my mother pushes back her hair with a haughty look. "There's someone in the city, as it happens. Martin. He's waiting for me."

My blood goes cold. I stare at her with growing disbelief. "Martin."

My voice sounds flat, my ears ringing as she grows animated again. chatting about this *Martin* and his *wealth*.

Just like that, William is forgotten,

Swept aside, just like Edward was. Like Jonathan before him. Like Niall, before that.

Just another stop on the road after all.

I feel sick.

"*And*," my mother says brightly, "he has a daughter! Just your age, too, and she sounds like a sweetheart. So you'll soon forget about those horrible, nasty boys."

As if they're *replaceable.*

No.

No.

I shake my head, and the smile disappears from her face. "Anastasia."

"I'm not going." My voice is firm. "You can't force me, mother. If you want to leave, then leave."

She throws back the bedcovers then, rising up to face me. It's then that I notice that her red hair is perfectly curled. Her make-up done to perfection.

"Tonight?" I choke out. "You're going tonight?"

She surveys me. "*We* are going tonight. No time like the present, and Martin is expecting me."

She's so cold. I feel as though ice is leaching from her and into me, soaking into me, turning me numb. "Like I said. You can leave. But I'm not going."

My mother sighs. And when she speaks, her voice is soft. But her words are razor sharp, sharp enough to hurt.

"And you'll… what? Stay here, with four older men?" She laughs. "What do you think people will say when they realize, Anastasia? They'll start to talk. You're only fifteen—,"

"I'm sixteen," I snap. "My birthday was *last week*."

My mother has the grace to look mildly embarrassed. "Oh. You didn't say."

I didn't tell anyone. It passed without a word. The boys wouldn't have known, but you would think my *mother* might remember the day she gave birth to me. By the time I realized she'd forgotten, I was too embarrassed to say anything at all.

She shakes it off as I stare at her in disbelief. "Regardless. A young girl staying with four older men? Those boys are of legal age, and you are not. People will start to talk."

"They've never touched me," I say heatedly. Truth.

"Well, I'm not surprised," my mother says dismissively. "Look at you. But the perception is all that matters. And the age of consent in Sorelle is eighteen. So if you want them to be arrested for statutory rape, by all means, *stay behind*. God knows it would make my life easier."

I can't speak. I just open and close my mouth. Wondering how the hell I ended up with this *person* for a mother. "That is such a load of *fucking bullshit*—,"

My head snaps to the side, and I stumble. The left side of my face burns.

"Don't curse at me," she hisses. "After all that I have given you, you ungrateful little bitch. You *will* get in the car when it arrives, and you *will* do exactly what I tell you to do. Or I will make sure those boys that you care about so much go to prison. For a very long time."

The fear floods my stomach, rising up my throat. Threatening to choke me.

"You don't have that sort of power," I rasp. My face stings, my skin hot and tight where her hand connected with it. William has money. He'd be able to fight any allegations easily.

But would he want to?

The small, vicious voice whispers in my ear.

Why would he fight for you?

Angelica draws herself up. "Martin is a judge. A powerful one. He has friends in high places. Do you want to test me and find out?"

I search desperately for something. Anything that I can use, anything that I can say that will let her allow me to stay here. But she watches me, cold and unyielding.

She's not going to change her mind. She never does.

But it never really mattered before.

"Please," I whisper. The first tear trickles out, and then another. "I'm begging you, mother. Don't do this."

Don't make me leave them.

"Oh, Anastasia," she says quietly. I flinch when she reaches out to pat my shoulder. "I know it feels as if they're everything to you right now. But when it comes down to it, they would never fight this hard for *you*. You'll feel better once we're away from here."

And then she moves on. Just like that. Slipping into her plans, the way she always does. I close my eyes, only half-listening to her hissed instructions.

"Take it all," she instructs me. "They won't miss it. Not for a while, anyway. We'll be well away by then."

"I know how this works." My voice is dull. "It's not like it's the first time."

"Fine." My mother dismisses me. "Remember. Not a word, or they're the ones that will pay for it."

I'm not looking where I'm going as I stumble out of the room, and I bump straight into someone. Rafe steadies me, his eyes lowering to my face.

"Hey." His hand nudges up my chin, but I duck away. "I was looking for you. What is it? Stasi?"

I can't do this.

Not when he's looking at me like that.

"I – I'm not feeling well," I choke out. "I think it's the same thing my mother has. I'm going to bed."

He tries to feel my forehead, but I back away. "I'll bring you some dinner."

Nausea twists my stomach, adding credence to my words when I press my hand against my mouth, genuinely concerned that I might throw up. "No, thank you. I'll – I'll be fine tomorrow."

Rafe nods, but he doesn't look convinced as he watches me. His eyes dip from mine, moving to the door I've just left. "Is Angelica alright?"

Does he sound suspicious?

Panic smothers me, making my voice jump in irritation. "She's fine."

He blinks at my snappy tone. "Okay. Just checking. I guess… I'll see you tomorrow."

I barely manage to nod, and he turns away from me, glancing back over his shoulder before he heads down the hall. It feels as though my chest is caving in as I watch him walk away, my snapped words the last thing between us. I nearly call out, nearly call him back.

I catch the words on my tongue. If I do that, then I might break down. And he would fight. He'd get Silas, and Kit, and they would speak to their father, and my mother might follow through on her threat.

I don't want anything to happen to them because of me.

I swallow, biting back the agony as I head to my room. Silas and Kit both knock on my door in the hours that follow, but I sit silently, my back against the door and my cheeks damp as they call my name in soft, worried voices.

But they leave. And eventually, the house grows quiet.

Slowly, I get dressed, slipping on the green checked dress I wore on my first day here and sliding my feet into black shoes.

When I open the wardrobe, I grab the small holdall I came with.

I don't have much that I want to take with me. Most of what I had was paid for by William, and it doesn't feel right. But there's a few things that I can't leave behind.

Branches from the orchard, whittled by Rafe into little makeshift animals that look nothing like what they're supposed to be. Stones from the stream that Kit and I found one day while paddling. And letters, from Silas. Letters that he slips under my door, on the days when we don't get to talk in the hall.

I grab a few more basics before I creep out, my throat tight as I move down the hall.

Past their bedrooms. Past my mother's room. I can hear footsteps inside, and I speed up, slipping into the last room at the very end and glancing around as I flick the light on.

I'm not supposed to be in here. It feels wrong, but my mother was very clear.

I glance at the photographs tucked into the mirror on the dressing table. At the smiling, dark-haired woman, soft and pretty and beaming, tucked beneath a grinning William. Two babies are cradled carefully in her arms, William holding a small boy with blue eyes. He's staring down at his little brothers, his eyes wide.

The image swims, and I look away.

I'm doing it for them, I tell her silently. *I'm sorry.*

I'm so sorry.

It's the only thing that could possibly drive me to pull open the delicate drawers of the dressing table. Rows and rows of jewelry greet me, just as my mother said. Slowly, I reach in, grabbing a set of glistening bracelets and dropping them into my bag.

Then the necklaces. The rings.

With each clink, the guilt consumes me, piece by piece. My hands shake violently, and it spreads across my body until I have to sit or I'm going to fall.

I try to breathe, curled over on the carpeted floor of their mother's dressing room. A sacred space, one that none of them will enter. Only William, sometimes, when he thinks nobody is watching.

And I'm here. *Desecrating* it.

I blink back tears. Tears of rage, of frustration.

I can't do this.

I tip out the contents of my bag in a rush, opening the drawers as I try to remember what goes where. I glance up, to the woman in the photo.

She's not having it, I promise her silently. *I won't let her have a single thing. I'll find a way.*

My mother has more than enough, without *this*.

I'll put it all back. And then I'm going straight to Silas. He can help, he's older, he'll speak to William—

"Anastasia?"

For a moment, I think I'm imagining it. Then my whole body turns cold.

Slowly, I twist my head towards the doorway.

"Silas."

My voice is a whisper as his eyes sweep over me. As he sees the contents of my bag, scattered all over the floor.

"I was – I was coming to find you." My voice falters as he steps inside, his movements slow as he walks up to where I'm kneeling. "My mother, Silas, she wants to leave. She wants me to go, and she's threatening to say things – about your father, you, the twins. Please—,"

Silas turns, and I fall silent at the look on his face.

The dawning realization. The hurt. And then the fury.

"This is my mother's jewelry." His voice is low, pained, as he picks up an emerald bracelet, rubbing his fingers across the stones, and it stabs me all the harder. "What are you doing with it, Anastasia?"

My sob breaks free. "I wasn't going to – I was putting it back, Silas. I swear to you – *please*. You have to speak to your father—,"

"Why?" His voice is a whip, rising in the small space. I shrink back as the anger pours from his mouth in savage words. "Because you're a thieving little whore?"

"What? *No*." I shake my head, frantic. "No, I swear. Silas, please *listen* to me—,"

But he's not listening. I cry out as he grips my arm, hard, lifting me from the floor.

"Shut up," he hisses. His face looks pale. "I don't want Rafe and Kit to hear. You understand?"

Biting my tongue hard, I nod quickly. He pulls me from the room, and I crane my head to the things scattered across the floor. "My things—,"

"Leave them," he mutters. "You won't need them."

My heart jumps as he almost pushes me down the stairs, still holding me tightly. "You'll help me? I'm so sorry – she told me she was going to come after you—,"

But he cuts off my words as we reach the main doors. A hand slaps over my mouth, and I inhale sharply against his skin.

"I trusted you," he says quietly. "I trusted you with my *family*. I told you not to hurt them, Anastasia. You promised me."

His voice hardens, and I shake my head beneath his grip.

"You're leaving now," he whispers. "And I never want to see your lying, thieving face again. You are as ugly on the inside as you are on the out, and I *despise* you. People like you deserve everything bad to happen to them."

He rips his hand away, and points. I stare blindly, reeling from his words. "Go. Now. Before I call the police."

"I don't want to go." My voice is a whimper as I reach for him, but he pushes me back. "Please, Silas. Please. Don't make me go with her. I don't want to leave you."

"*Liar*!"

It's a roar, and I flinch away from his anger. He follows me, grabbing my arm again and yanking me out of the doors, towards the cab where my mother waits with a bored expression.

"Take her," he spits out, pushing me towards her. "Our lives will be far, far better without your poison in it. *Both* of you."

My mother yawns, before she opens the door and slides inside. "So dramatic."

I stare at Silas. He doesn't meet my eye, but he crosses his arms. He's not going to let me back inside. "My things—,"

"You brought nothing with you," he says coldly. "And you'll leave with nothing."

No. This is all wrong.

"Not those things," I sob. "Silas—."

"Get in the car," he says quietly, "Or I will make you."

A hand grips my wrist. "Stop making a show of yourself," my mother hisses. Her nails dig into my skin, and I make a pained sound.

Silas's eyes dip down. Just for a moment, I see him waver. But then his face hardens again.

"Goodbye, Anastasia," he says coldly. "You were entertaining enough, I suppose. A little dull, truth be told. It won't be long before we forget that you ever existed. Perhaps you'll have more luck with your next target."

"You don't mean that," I say hoarsely, staring at him.

But he doesn't respond.

He turns his back, and then my mother is dragging me into the car, telling the agog driver to pull off as I sob, wrapping my arms around myself.

As the car pulls away, taking me far away from Oakbourne Manor.

And far away from them.

30 — Silas — ten years ago

I can't breathe.

Can't breathe for the agony crushing my lungs, gripping my heart tightly and squeezing, squeezing so hard that I drop down to my knees as the car pulls away.

Taking the liar with it.

I force myself to swallow, to suck in oxygen as I stagger to my feet and run a hand over my hair in disbelief.

"What the hell just happened?"

My voice is a whisper. And it hurts, it hurts so damn much to think of that moment when I walked into my mother's bedroom. I didn't believe Angelica when she told me they were leaving, didn't want to believe that Anastasia would do that to us. To *me.*

But Stasi was right where Angelica said she would be. Helping herself to our mother's jewelry.

I jog back upstairs, heading straight to the dressing room. I want to see if anything is missing.

My eyes flick across the spilled items on the floor. Stasi's bag sits beside it, and when I check inside, it's empty.

Another pulse of pain.

Gone. She's gone.

This is for the best, I tell myself. *She's poison.*

But my resolve wavers as I stare at the floor. Something… something doesn't look right. Frowning, I yank open the drawers and look inside. Piles of jewelry are jumbled up in piles, not in the neat sections they'd normally be.

As if… somebody threw it back inside. In panic.

She wants me to go, and she's threatening to say things.

I was putting it back.

I don't want to go.

I don't want to leave you.

And as I kneel, I see her things tossed in amongst the jewelry. As if… as if she changed her mind, before I walked in. Flipped her bag over.

My fingers brush against a familiar folded note, Stasi's name scribbled in my spiky handwriting across the front.

There's nothing else here. None of the clothes paid for by my father. None of the expensive bags, shoes, that he tried to give

to her, only giving up when it became clear that she wasn't interested in any of that.

My breath catches in my chest. These were the things she wanted to take. The only things.

And I stopped her from getting them.

I threw her out.

And then I'm up, sprinting down the hall, taking the stairs three at a time and flying out of the door. "*Stasi*!"

She can't possibly hear me. How could she?

But my feet eat up the space between us, pounding at the gravel as I run, faster than I've ever fucking run before. The wind whips against my face as I race through the gates, trying desperately to catch just a glimpse of the cab lights.

Maybe, just maybe, they've stopped. Pulled over.

I don't know how I'm ever going to find her otherwise.

I let her go.

I *made* her go.

Please. I'm sorry. Please.

Because I think I've just made a mistake. A fucking terrible mistake.

The image of Angelica's nails digging into her skin rips into me, and I roar her name again.

And again.

Even as I have to stop, my breathing jagged as my lungs scream for air, and there's still no sign of her.

She's gone.

And I let it happen. *Made* it happen, in my anger, too furious to see what she was trying to tell me, even as she begged. Instead I dragged her out, making her leave her things behind, throwing her at her vile mother as if I was tossing out the trash.

My eyes close.

I don't know what to do. How to fix this.

But my dad will.

It takes me longer to make my way back to the house. As I reach the courtyard, an engine rumbles behind me, and I whirl around in sudden, desperate hope.

But it's not her.

Instead, my father pulls up, headlights flashing over my face. The doors open, footsteps crunching on the gravel, and he's there, his hands on my shoulders.

"What is it?" he says, his head spinning towards the house. "The twins? What happened, Silas?"

I stare at him wordlessly. I don't even know how to explain it.

But slowly, the words start to tumble out. My father takes a step back, his face paling. His hands fall away from my shoulders as he turns towards the house.

He doesn't love Angelica. Not the way he loved my mother. I know that. But he liked her well enough, enjoyed her company.

I follow him upstairs, right behind him as he ducks into their bedroom.

"Dad," I say hoarsely. "I need… I *need* you to find Anastasia."

But he's not listening. He's digging through the drawer next to his side of the bed, muttering furiously.

"No. No, no, she *wouldn't*—,"

He stops. Just… stops. And he turns, a small box in his hand.

"She took them," he says quietly. And the pain in his voice… I don't know how to respond to that. Instead, I step forward, looking down at what he's holding. When he looks up at me, his eyes are wet. "Our wedding rings. Your mothers, and mine."

There's a roaring in my ears. "Angelica?"

My father nods slowly, his eyes dropping to the empty box. "I… I should have known, really."

His voice breaks, and I don't know what to do.

"Dad," I whisper, "I'm sorry. But – but we can find them. Get them back."

Get Anastasia back.

My dad lifts a hand to his chest, massaging it. He looks pale, dazed. "Yes. We'll – we'll do that."

He takes a step. Another step.

"Dad?" I ask warily. He looks… he doesn't look *right*.

And I watch in growing horror as my father, my strong, tall father, *falls*, like a puppet with its strings cut.

He hits the floor too quickly for me to catch him.

I think I cry out. A noise tears from my throat, one I've never made before.

And then Rafe and Kit are *there*, talking rapidly, begging, as I pull my dad into my arms. Pressing shaking fingers against his pulse. But there's nothing there, nothing to try and save, even as Rafe shouts into the phone, screaming at the emergency services with increasing desperation.

His lips are blue.

Why are his lips blue?

The lights are blue too.

They dance across the wall as they finally arrive, far too late to do anything at all.

"Silas." Kit grips my shoulder, my little brother. He squeezes gently. "Silas. You need to let him go now. It's alright."

His voice breaks.

That's not right. He shouldn't be comforting me. It needs to be the other way around.

They don't… they don't have anyone else now.

And then I realize, as Rafe's voice echoes from around me. "Where's Angelica? Anastasia?"

They don't know what's happened.

If they hadn't done this… if Anastasia had *trusted* me, then it wouldn't have happened at all.

My father would not have died from a broken heart.

My brothers would not be orphans.

And maybe I wouldn't feel so alone.

Slowly, the grief hardens. Solidifies, into anger. Icy, cold anger. And I open my arms to it, embrace the numbness that steals over me as the days turn into weeks, then months. Years.

As I struggle to learn how to do the things my father once did, so easily.

Until he was taken from me. Because of *them*.

And as the years slip by, I settle into his shoes. Outgrow them, even. Increasing our income, our influence, until even the royal family is reliant on us to subsidize their overblown, flamboyant lifestyle. We become the most influential men in Sorelle, and all I can feel… is numb.

Numb is better than the pain.

But no matter how much money I throw at the search, I can never find them. Angelica and Anastasia are gone, as if they never existed in the first place.

Stasi.

31 – Rafe

I knock on the door of Silas's office. "Si?"

When he doesn't respond, I push the door open. "You didn't come to breakfast."

He always comes to breakfast. Always. One of the traditions we've kept from our dad. When we're together, we eat together.

But as he glances up from his desk, I stop. "What is it?"

My older brother looks like he hasn't slept at all. Dark circles sit beneath his eyes. "I told Stasi. About dad."

I digest the information slowly, settling down in the chair in front of his desk. Guilt swoops, low in my stomach. I still haven't apologized. I haven't seen her since yesterday's little incident in the hall. "Right."

He sighs, sweeping a hand over his face. "I'm fucking this up, Rafe."

I study him. My brother is the last person to open up, to share anything about himself with us. And I know why. "You don't have to carry everything on your shoulders, you know."

He gives me a wry look, and I shake my head. "We knew this was going to be hard. Having her here."

Silas purses his lips. "We did. But… I didn't expect *her*, Rafe."

I turn the words over in my mind. But I know what he means. "We expected a brat."

He nods. We expected a spoiled, demanding princess. We thought she'd *changed*. But what we got was the same Stasi we remember. Strong, quiet, taking everything we throw at her and managing to give us hell whilst working her damn ass off. And we're all struggling to reconcile it with the knowledge of what she's done.

"It wasn't just us," I point out. "Ella Cooper, Silas. She left us, she went there, and we know what happened."

"Do we?" he says slowly. "Kit seems pretty convinced we have it wrong. And she doesn't act like someone who's used to being waited on hand and foot."

My jaw tightens. Kit and I are rarely at odds, and to be so now irritates the hell out of me. "He always sees the best in everyone."

Silas nods, slowly. "And… maybe he's right."

I suck in a breath, and he looks up at me. "She was devastated, Rafe. When I told her about dad. She – she couldn't even look at me. You can't fake that kind of reaction. I could see the guilt written all over her face. None of her actions fit with what

we *think* we know."

He hesitates. "And… I need to tell you something. About that night."

As he speaks, my hand tightens on the arm of my chair. Tightens until I hear the wood snap. "You *threw her out*?"

My voice rises, and Silas glances at me. "I found her on the floor," he says slowly. "All the jewelry was there. But… it's possible that she *was* putting it back. And the more she's here, the more I watch her… the more I think that I might have gotten it wrong."

Neither of us hear the door open. But Silas's head jerks up, and I turn to see Kit in the doorway. He scans us, his face set. "You did get it fucking wrong."

But he doesn't sound surprised. Silas's eyes raise. "You already knew?"

He nods. "She told me. And asked me *not* to blame you."

My body feels cold. Cold, and then hot, waves crashing over me, my heart tightening like a fist. "We couldn't have gotten it that wrong."

Kit glares at me. "We didn't even stop to think about it before we went for her. We walked into that fucking throne room, and she thought we were there to *help*. Did you know that?"

We both stare at him.

Silas sounds hoarse. "What?"

Kit crosses his arms. "She thought we were there to speak up for her, as a character witness. Nobody else had. *She had nobody else*. But when we turned up, we just kicked her down again."

My stomach twists, flipping over itself. "We didn't know. We still don't know. Not for certain."

"*I know*," Kit roars the words, his face angrier than I have ever seen it. "I know. And if you can't pull your fucking heads out of your asses long enough to realize how much we have *fucked this up*, then I don't know what else there is to say."

She had nobody else.

And if Kit is right, if Silas is telling the truth about what happened that night and she didn't want to leave… *fuck*.

Silas is silent. Both Kit and I look to him. As we have always done. But our oldest brother is not infallible. And he looks so tired, so uncertain.

And I remember how he looked, that night. With his arms wrapped around our father's body, not letting go until Kit coaxed him to stand up. And then he took a breath, and he focused on us. He woke up the next morning and dragged us both to breakfast, refusing to let us sink into the pit of grief that hovered over us all. He found Ellen, bringing her in to keep the house going, to keep it a *home.*

He kept *us* going, pushing down his own grief to give ours the space to air.

So I don't ask him. Instead, I think it over in my head. "Let's invite them to dinner."

Both of them look at me as though I've lost my mind, and I clarify.

"Ella Cooper. Crispin. Have them over for dinner. I want to see how she acts around Stasi."

I can see them both considering it, but the more I think of it, the more I become set. I want to see Ella Cooper close up, see if I can get through that sweet exterior, flip it over to see what's crawling beneath.

And if Kit is right, if Silas is right… then I'm going to take her down.

Finally, they both nod.

"She may not want to come," Silas points out, but Kit shakes his head. His eyes meet mine, gleaming, and I know we're on the same page again.

"She'll come."

I clear my throat. "I'll make the arrangements when I'm in the city later."

Silas frowns. "You're going again? Is something wrong?"

I half-shrug. "Some of the men are causing issues. Laz Mayhew is mouthing off about how we're losing our grip. It's having a ripple effect, nothing I can't handle. But… I don't like the man. I've heard things."

Silas sits up at that. "Have him come here instead. It'll piss him off to travel so far from the city, put him on edge, and we can make a decision from there."

I consider it. I don't particularly want him here, in our home, but he has a point. It really will piss him off, and I'm not in the mood to pander to the man. "You want to join?"

"I could use a distraction," Silas says. "If you don't mind, that is."

I blink, as he defers to me. "It's your business."

"But they're your men," he says pointedly. "And you work well with them. I won't overstep."

I can feel myself straighten at the approval in his tone. "I'd welcome it."

"Good." And when he offers me a smile, I wonder. Silas raises an eyebrow when he sees me staring, and I cough out a laugh at the silent question. "You just… you seem different."

He stares at me for a moment. "Maybe that's not a bad thing."

No. Maybe it's not.

Maybe we could all do with a little change. And as I leave, I decide to find the person I suspect is responsible for my older brother's softening.

After a phone call to an irritated Laz to confirm his attendance this evening, I go on the hunt.

And when I find her, I have to smile at the irritated mutters coming from the bathroom.

"Fucking *men*. Disgusting."

I wince, but I slide my head around the door. Stasi is on her knees, scrubbing the inside of the shower cubicle. Her head whips around to stare at me, and then she looks back down at her work. "What do you want, Rafe?"

But she doesn't sound as fierce as she normally does. A little cautious, perhaps.

I can't say that I blame her. "Can I… speak with you?"

She continues her scrubbing. "Do I get a choice?"

"Yes," I say softly. "I'll leave, if you would rather I didn't."

She turns back to me, then. Strands of hair cling to her forehead, and she pushes them back as a crease appears between her eyebrows.

"That makes a change," she says, watching me. I wait for her to toss the sponge into her bucket and get to her feet. "What is it? Is Kit okay?"

The sudden concern in her voice for my twin makes my throat tighten. "He's fine. Everything is fine."

"Oh." She wraps her arms around herself. "Okay. Well… I'm listening."

Sliding my hands into my pockets, I rock back on my heels. "I'm sorry, Stasi."

Her head jerks up, and she regards me warily. "You're sorry? What for?"

I hesitate. *Everything*, I want to say. It's on the tip of my tongue.

But… I'm still not certain. Not certain enough to offer her that part of me.

Not when she already broke it once before. Whatever happened that night… she still lied to us. My father brought Angelica, brought *her*, into our home, and they lied to us over and over again.

But there are still some things I need to atone for.

"For making you believe that I would ever ask you to fuck me in exchange for favors," I say quietly. I don't sugar coat the words. "I *never* want you to think that we – that I – would take advantage of you like that, while you're here."

Stasi swallows, still hugging her arms around herself. Her cheeks flush lightly. "I… I didn't really think you would. But it still hurt, Rafe."

Fuck, if the small shake in her voice doesn't hit me straight in the chest. "I will never, ever say it again," I say hoarsely. "And I never want you to feel that you aren't safe here."

She looks at me, then. "I do feel safe here. Even if…,"

She stumbles over the words. "Even if I'm a - a servant. I know… I understand things are different now. And this is your home."

"It was your home, too, once." The words slip out, and she tips her head back. For a moment, I see the pain on her face.

"No, it wasn't," she whispers. "Maybe it felt like that. To both of us. But I was always just… passing through."

I don't want to have this conversation in the doorway. So I stroll over to the bench opposite it, taking a seat and patting it.

"Please," I say, when she hesitates. And when Stasi settles beside me, I take a moment.

"Tell me," I say finally. I don't look at her, leaning forward to rest my elbows on my knees. "Please. I know you told Kit. And Silas… he already knew."

Her head whips towards me. "He told you."

Nodding, I turn my face to hers. "Please," I breathe. "Tell me. Not just that night, but… but all of it. How it came about, Stasi. I need to know."

It's eaten me up for ten years, not knowing how far the deception went.

I need to know if every part of her that I ever saw was a lie.

"Was it always planned?" I choke out the words. "Or was it just a… a spur of the moment thing?"

She closes her eyes, her voice barely a whisper. "I hoped it would never happen at all."

And as I fall silent, Anastasia begins to speak. Of her mother, and their past. The different houses, the schools, the names.

"Anastasia Cooper." I twist towards her, and she grimaces.

"I really hate that name."

"How many have you had? Do you remember your original name?"

She shrugs, helplessly. "I'm not sure, truthfully. Angelica… she changed it all the time. Maybe to stop people from catching up with us. I don't know. She'd normally change it to whoever we were with at the time, but… she never changed it to Tate."

I close my eyes at the wistful tone in her voice. "So you never had a home?"

"I did, once." She clears her throat. "When my father was alive, we were… we were happy. But he died, and the money disappeared too quickly. My mother had expensive taste. So she found someone who could give her what she wanted. And then, when she became bored, or they cut her off, she would move on to somebody else."

A leech. Dragging her daughter along behind her.

It's a world apart from the peaceful childhood my father gave us.

I study my hands. "I wish you'd told me. Told any of us."

She sighs. "I wish that I'd done a lot of things differently. But that… I have regretted it every day, Rafe. I'm sorry. And… I'm sorry about your dad. William was a kind man."

The guilt in her voice surprises me. "That wasn't your fault."

"Wasn't it?" She's staring down when I turn to her.

"No," I say gently. "I don't think there's any use in proportioning blame for something that may well have happened anyway. And in any case, if there were *any* blame, it would rest solely with Angelica. What… what happened to her?"

Stasi's shoulders stiffen. "Cancer."

Here we sit. Both of us orphans. But I always had my brothers to lean on.

Who did you have, Stasi?

She jerks, but her fingers curl around my palm when I slide my hand over hers. "I'm sorry about your mother. That was when you were living with Ella Cooper?"

I'm not intentionally prying, more following a trail of thought. But her hand stiffens in mine, sliding away. "I should… I should get back to work, Rafe."

When she stands, I follow her lead, regret tightening my throat as she looks up at me. "Thank you for telling me."

"Thank you for the apology," she murmurs in return.

I half-smile. "I'm sorry for the floors, too."

She snorts a laugh. "Are you? Because you would never have apologized for that ten years ago."

The smile grows a little deeper, the corners of my lips tipping up. "The jokes were always more fun when you were next to me, you know."

Her answering smile is sad. "Everything was more fun when you were next to me, Rafe."

She turns away before I can respond. It takes me seconds to recover from the emotional hammer in my chest, seconds before I can call out to her, trying to get my thoughts in order when she rips them apart with every interaction we have. "Stasi."

She turns. "Yes?"

"We have someone coming for dinner," I say softly, holding her eyes. "A business associate. There are some things that we need to discuss with him. But… I would stay in your room tonight. I don't want him to see you."

Her eyes shutter, and I wonder if she understands my meaning as she turns away, her tone subdued. "All right."

Maybe she thinks I'm ashamed of her. But I miss the chance to tell her otherwise, as the bathroom door closes.

Besides. How could I possibly explain the feelings in my chest to her, when I don't understand them myself?

32 — Stasi

Ellen shoos me out of the kitchen before I've even finished eating. "Go on, now. Off to bed."

I glance at the clock. "But I haven't cleaned up yet."

But she shakes her head. "Don't worry about that. I'll clean up this evening. Rafe was very clear. Stay there until the morning."

I bet he was.

But the jab doesn't feel as good as it would have even this morning. Not after sitting with him, listening to him. After sharing my side with him.

And now… now they all know the truth. *Our* truth, at least. My throat tightens as I head into my room, gently pushing the door closed before taking a seat on the edge of my bed.

They all know. And yet I feel like I don't know anything, anymore.

The Tate brothers have me tied up in knots, all over again. Just like they did when I was fifteen. And this time, things are… even more difficult. If that's possible.

I'm their *prisoner*. Their responsibility.

And they seem intent on breaking me open, one by one. Chipping little parts of me away, piece by piece, taking them and putting them under a microscope.

They are making me feel *seen*.

They're the only ones who ever did.

I thought the men I knew were gone. But the longer I spend here, the more I see them. Flashes, hints, hidden beneath the hurt and anger but *there*, even if they have changed.

And I can't judge them for changing, for not being those boys anymore.

It happens to us all. Everybody changes. We are all the sum of our experiences. Layer after layer that builds up over time. Only fate decides which experiences will be *good*.

And so often, the experiences that shape us the most are not good at all.

I lay there for hours, blinking at the ceiling.

Trying not to think about them. And failing.

Finally, I sit up. My bladder is shouting at me, and I glance towards the door.

Rafe wouldn't have meant for me not to go to the bathroom. As long as I don't wander into the dining room, it'll be fine.

I still feel like I'm doing something wrong as I ease the door open and poke my head out. The hall is clear, and I slip out and down into the bathroom without an issue.

It's when I'm leaving it that it happens.

I'm so focused on my bedroom door that I jump a mile at the unfamiliar voice.

"Well. What do we have here?"

Shit. Rafe is going to be *pissed.*

Slowly, I turn. The man strolling up the hall isn't familiar to me. Tall, broad-shouldered. Handsome enough, with bright, blonde hair and brown eyes that sweep me up and down.

It's the look in his eye that makes me take a step back. I force a smile. "Hi. Don't mind me. I'm just heading back to bed."

He eats up the space between us. "You must be Anastasia. I've heard a lot about you."

His lip curls a little. When I turn, intending to leave, his hand reaches out, grabbing my wrist. "Where are you running off to, hmm?"

My muscles lock up. "Please let me go."

He smirks. "No need to look so scared. I'm just curious. Everyone is talking about the ugly stepsister, after all."

I steel myself as he blatantly stares down at my body. "Not the prettiest. But certainly not ugly."

My breathing speeds up as his grip on my wrist tightens. He gives me the same vibes as Parrish did.

I glance down the hallway behind him, searching for any sign of Rafe. Silas. Kit.

But the hallway is empty. "Won't Rafe be looking for you?"

His face twists into something unfamiliar. "Rafe won't begrudge me a little playtime with his toy, I'm sure."

My body breaks into a cold sweat as he steps in closer. He reaches out, and I stay completely still as his finger traces down my neck. Lower.

"No," he murmurs. "Not ugly."

I brace myself. *Breathe, Stasi.*

In. Out.

And then I kick him, as hard as I can. My foot connects with his shin, and he lets go of my wrist.

And I *run*. Not back to my room, where he can corner me. But down the hall, towards the dining room. To them.

A curse rings out from behind me, and I cry out as a hand tangles in my hair, yanking me back with savage, burning pain.

"Little bitch," he hisses, slapping his hand over my mouth. "You clearly need a better lesson than what they're teaching you."

I fight. My hand scratches at his skin, digging into his face and raking down his cheek as he tries to push me down. He swears again, and my head whips to the side as he slaps me hard with his open palm.

It gives him an advantage, as my vision doubles. My hands are weaker now, pushing at his shoulders as he forces me down, using his body to hold me in place as my legs scrabble desperately against the floor.

I twist, my hands reaching out as his fingers wrap around my neck.

"I'm going to enjoy this," he grunts. His hands roam down, and I choke on the sob in my throat.

"Please, *please, stop*—,"

There's a roar from behind me. The weight crushing me down disappears.

And hands are pulling me up as I flinch. Kit is there, his hands running up and down my arms frantically before he cups my face. "Stasi. Jesus. *Stasi*."

I stare into his pale face, my breath seesawing in and out. "Kit. He – he…"

My face crumples, and he hauls me against him, wrapping his arms around me. "I've got you," he murmurs. "You're safe."

He repeats the words over and over again, his hands stroking over the back of my head as I bury my face in his chest, trying to believe him. My legs are shaking badly, the rest of me not much better.

And behind me, thuds ring out. I can hear Silas, hear Rafe, hear the sheer, blazing fury in their voices. And I can hear the broken, choked sounds of the man who pinned me down.

And then I'm turned, and Rafe is there, his hands on my face. He scans me frantically. "Stasi," he breathes. "I'm so sorry."

"No, I'm sorry," I choke out. "You told me not to leave my room."

"Don't you *dare* apologize." He strokes my face, and his fingers pause when I wince. He tilts my face to the side, under the light.

And his face grows darker still. Darker than I've ever seen it. "He hit you."

He whirls away from me, and Kit holds me tightly as Silas drags the man over, his hand gripping the back of his neck. The man's face is barely recognizable, and I flinch as Silas throws him down. His eyes are nearly black when he looks at me, his eyes zeroing in on my face.

Silas reaches down, dragging the man up to his knees as I shrink back into Kit.

"It's okay," he whispers. "We've got you."

The man coughs, and a trail of blood appears at the corner of his mouth. Rafe leans forward and yanks his hair back. His voice is pitch black when he speaks. "You dared to *touch* her, Lazarus."

Lazarus. That's his name.

He garbles out something unintelligible, and my breath catches when Silas presses something against the side of his head.

A gun.

"Beg her," he says, his voice without mercy. His knuckles are bruised and bloody. "On your fucking knees. Apologize, and beg her forgiveness, Lazarus. Beg for your miserable fucking life."

Kit's warmth soaks into my back, and I lean into it further, trying to chase away the cold stealing over my soul.

I have never seen this side of them. This… darkness.

Lazarus looks up at me, his eyes unfocused, and I can't stop the flinch.

Three matching snarls ring out. Kit tightens his grip. "I'm taking her to the kitchen. She doesn't need to see this."

But when he tries to urge me away, I don't move.

Instead, I stare down at the man who tried to assault me. He's crying now, the tears mixing with snot on his face as the barrel of Silas's gun presses deeper into his forehead.

His apology is incoherent, babbled words that don't make sense. But I get the gist.

"Stasi." I look away from him, look at Silas. His face is hard, but I see him. I see the pain in his eyes, even as his hand stays steady. "Go with Kit."

I don't look away. "Are you going to kill him?"

I don't care that my voice shakes. I think I'm entitled to it, really. Silas doesn't move as he meets my gaze, resolute. "Yes. He doesn't get to touch you and live."

My eyes close slowly. And I make a decision. "All right."

Before I turn, I stare back down at Lazarus. The blood on his face gleams beneath the lights.

"I'm going now," I say to him. My voice doesn't shake this time. "But I want you to know that you deserve this, you evil, raping son of a bitch. And I hope they make it hurt."

"We will," Rafe says darkly. His fingers brush mine as I move past him. "Kit will take care of you. I'm coming to you as soon as we're done."

My nod feels numb, and I lean into Kit as he wraps his arm around my shoulder, and turns me away from the sight of him, kneeling on the floor.

"Will they do it… there?" I ask Kit in a whisper as he leads me into the kitchen. He hesitates, his eyes on my face.

"No. There is a place, not far from here. He won't be found."

Slowly, I nod. The adrenaline is draining away, leaving exhaustion in its wake, and I sit heavily on a stool as Kit opens a cupboard and pours me a glass of something dark.

"Drink this," he says gently. He wraps my fingers around the glass, squeezing before he lets go. "It will help."

I take a large gulp, and then cough as fire races through my veins. "Jesus."

I wave Kit off when he reaches for the glass, taking another deep swig. And another, until the glass is clear. I hold it out to him silently, and he refills it for me.

"Rafe knew," he says quietly, and I glance up at him. "That something was wrong. Laz had been gone too long, and he picked up on it. He ran, and we followed."

I flex my wrist out, testing the sore muscle. "He did tell me not to leave the bedroom. I should have listened."

Kit reaches for my wrist, his eyes flicking to me in silent request. When I nod, he carefully takes it in his hand, pressing gently against the bone. "It's not broken."

His fingers slide down to my hand, gripping it. I let him, let him hold onto me.

My voice is small when I speak again. "I didn't… I didn't think anyone would come. In time."

"Stasi," Kit says roughly when my voice cracks. "Come here."

I slide from my stool as he opens his arms, unashamedly nestling into them, breathing him in.

"I told you," he murmurs into my hair. "You're not on your own anymore. I'm just sorry that we didn't get there in time to stop him from touching you."

I glance up at his tone. His eyes aren't on me. They're on the kitchen door, and his face is edged with the promise of violence.

"So," I whisper, wanting to distract him. "Guns, huh?"

It works. He stiffens beneath me. Clears his throat. "Our work is… complicated."

"Illegal," I test.

His lips twist.

"*Complicated*. Most of what we do is completely legal. But…,"

He sighs. "There is always a dark side where money is involved. People will do almost anything to get it. To take it from you. So we do what we must, when we need to."

I mull it over as his fingers tighten on my back.

"We protect what's ours," he says quietly. "Including you."

His words shouldn't make me feel warm. Silas and Rafe are outside in the dark, ending a man's *life* because he tried to hurt me. And yet I can't bring myself to feel the slightest bit of upset over it.

It feels nice to be protected.

When they walk in, I'm sat on Kit's lap with an ice pack held over my cheek. Rafe stalks in first. The sleeves of his shirt are pushed up, filthy at the ends with mud and something darker. There's a streak of scarlet across his cheek.

His eyes immediately find mine, and Kit relinquishes me to his twin as Rafe draws me close, his hands reaching up to examine the bruising. "I want to kill him again. Are you...,"

"I'm fine," I promise him. It's not far from the truth. My limbs have stopped shaking, the cold chased away by Kit's embrace. "I swear, Rafe."

His hands tighten on my face. "I promised you that you were *safe* here."

At his desolate tone, I cautiously lift my hands up, placing them over his cheeks. He jerks. "I'm a mess—,"

"I don't care," I tell him firmly, stopping him from pulling away. "I am safe here. You found me. You came in time, Rafe."

His breathing is choppy and harsh as he watches me. "I should have been faster."

I tip one shoulder up in a shrug. "Should have, would have, could have. You got there in time to stop him."

His lips are a thin line, his green eyes glittering. But his fingers reach up, sliding around my neck as he slowly presses his forehead to mine. "I couldn't live with myself if something happened to you."

"You don't have to," I say gently. "Because I'm still here. And he's… swimming with the fishes."

Rafe draws his head back, his eyebrows raising. And the uncompromising line of his mouth, softens, lifts at the corners. "Swimming with the fishes?"

He sounds… entertained. I flush. "Isn't that what happens?"

And he snorts with laughter. "Not quite. Although I wasn't expecting you to sound quite so… *well-versed,* in the art of body disposal."

Frowning, I step back and cross my arms. "How do you do it, then?"

He stares at me. "You really want to know?"

I debate it. "Yep."

He leans in, and I tilt my head. He whispers.

"Pigs?" My eyes feel like saucers. "Seriously?"

He nods, and I can see him trying not to laugh. "Seriously. They'll eat anything. There's a farm up the road."

I don't know whether to be horrified or intrigued.

"Damn," I breathe. "I'm never eating pork again."

Farewell, sweet bacon. It was fun while it lasted.

Silence.

And then *laughter*, both Rafe and Kit bursting out in guffaws that make my cheeks heat in embarrassment, even as I find myself fighting my own smile.

"Where's Silas?" I ask when they trail off.

Rafe hesitates. "He was… messy. He went straight to clean up."

Right. I try not to cringe.

Nodding, I twist to look between them. "I should probably get back to bed."

It's late, and they both look tired. Rafe carefully places his hand on my back. "We'll walk you up."

We have to pass through the hall, and I pause, glancing down at the floor. There's no sign of any blood, only drying marks as though the floor has been… cleaned.

"Silas," Rafe offers in explanation. "He didn't want you to have to see anything."

"At least I don't have to clean it tomorrow." But my quip falls flat, and the twins exchange glances over my head. I look between them. "What?"

"Nothing." Kit reaches for my door, twisting the handle and pushing it open. He turns back to me, cupping my cheek and leaning in to kiss my forehead. "Try to get some rest. Do you want me to stay?"

I hesitate, torn between wanting him with me and not wanting either of them to think that I'm scared. Finally, I shake my head. "I'll be fine."

His violet eyes examine me closely, but he doesn't argue as I pass him, twisting in the doorway. "Night."

Rafe shifts. "Call if you need us. Either of us. Promise me."

"I promise," I whisper. I offer them both a smile before I push the door closed.

I crawl under the covers, pulling them over me until I'm covered.

It takes a minute.

And then the shaking begins again. Starting in my hands, working its way up.

I told them I was fine.
I *am* fine.
They came before the worst happened.
But I can’t stop seem to stop *shaking*.

33 — Silas

The red flows off my skin, swirling away down the drain as I scrub.

Scrub the last, odious traces of Lazarus Mayhew from beneath my nails. Black joins the red, dirt and blood and who the fuck knows what else mixing together and sliding away from my skin.

Turning my hand over, I examine my knuckles. The skin is split, cracked, my own blood oozing out.

And then I turn, and I slam my fist back into the wall.

Crack.

Again.

It's not enough. The small bite of pain pales in comparison to the look in her eyes when Kit pulled her up, away from that fucking rat of a man who now lies in pieces less than a mile away from where she sleeps.

My breathing is harsh as the water sluices over me. She should have been safe under my fucking roof. I should have known better than to have him here, than to even fucking suggest it.

I should never have put her at risk.

The water turns cold, icy, and I embrace it, tipping my head up and attempting to chase the fire from my veins. My adrenaline is surging, the activity of the last hour not nearly enough to put the flames out.

Dismemberment was not enough for him. I could have ripped him apart over days, weeks, months. It still would not have been *enough*.

I debate going downstairs, going to join them, but I can't look at her, can't see the fear in her eyes, my own fucking *failure* reflected back at me.

Because I'm scared. Scared that she'll look at me differently.

The twins will take care of her. They're far, far better than me at that.

They're what she needs right now.

Eventually, I step out of the shower, wrapping a towel around my waist. I should wrap my knuckles, but my head is still turning over the images in my mind.

I can't stop seeing it, the memory burned into my retinas even as I scrubbed his blood from the floor, every fucking inch of it so she didn't have to be faced with it.

When I eventually walk into the bedroom, it takes me a moment to realize that someone is tapping on the door.

The gentle taps are soft. Cautious.

Undeniably hers.

My throat tightens, my feet eating up the space rapidly as I throw the door open. "What's wrong?"

Stasi blinks at me, wrapping her arms around herself as she hesitates. "I… I couldn't sleep. I just… I *can't*—,"

It's then that I notice her fingers shaking. My eyes rise up to meet hers, the fist in my chest tightening at the wetness there. She dashes her hand across her eyes to wipe at them, but it keeps coming.

"Come here," I say roughly.

She meets me with a muffled sob, and I kick the door shut, wrapping my arms around her as she cries. She feels like air in my arms as I lift her, her arms lifting to wrap around my neck as I carry us both over to my bed, sitting on the edge. "Stasi. Where are the twins?"

They would never have left her like this.

She hiccups into my shoulder. "I asked them to go. I said… I *was* fine. I really was, and then I was on my own and I just wanted to not *be* alone."

She looks up at me. "And then I thought that you were alone too. And before, when we were in your office – I didn't feel so alone then, Silas. And I thought that maybe—,"

Her voice catches as I try to follow her words. She takes a breath.

"I thought that maybe we could be alone together." Her words are nearly inaudible as she drops her face down, hiding her eyes from me.

Alone, together.

She sucks in a breath, and I watch as her skin flushes a dull red. "I'm sorry. This was… it was stupid. Just forget it. I'm going to go now."

She tries to slide down from my lap, but my hands tighten around her. "Stop."

She pauses, but she still doesn't look at me. "I'm fine. Really. I just – I had a moment, and I thought…"

"What?" My voice is hoarse, my fingers so fucking gentle as they press beneath her chin. I need to see her face. "What did you think?"

Stasi's eyes rake across my face. As if she sees me. All of me.

She has always looked at me like that, I realize suddenly. As though she sees all of the deepest, darkest parts of me. But she doesn't turn away.

"I wanted you," she says finally. As though the words are simple, even as she tilts my world on its axis. "I needed *you*. So, I'm here."

Her admission fills the air between us, fills up my damn lungs until it feels like I can breathe properly for the first time in years. My eyes close for a single moment, just to let the words soak in. Because I need her, too.

I have always needed her.

And I inhale sharply, as soft lips press against mine.

Once.

Twice.

My mouth parts, and Anastasia twists on my lap, her hands sliding up to my face as she brushes my lower lip.

And then she pulls away. My eyes open.

"I'm sorry," she rushes out, her face a deep, deep scarlet. "I just—,"

I cut the words off as my mouth covers hers. I mirror her movements, cupping her face, tilting it at just the right angle to taste her, my tongue slipping into her mouth. And it feels as if my entire life has been a build-up to this moment, to her in my arms, exactly where she fucking should be.

She moans beneath me, shifting, her legs wrapping around my waist as I slide my hand around the back of her neck, holding her to me.

I will never get enough. I knew it, knew it from the first touch of her lips on mine that I would be lost to her.

I told her that I wanted to own her.

But it has always been the other way around.

She gasps when I tug her back further, my mouth moving from hers to give me access to the soft skin of her neck. "Silas."

The sound of my name on her lips is the best kind of music. I keep my touch gentle, my lips tasting her as I move down. And then I stop.

"Stasi," I pull back, my eyes roving across my face as she watches me, flushed and soft and warm. "This is not the night."

But she shakes her head, a hint of fire creeping into her eyes. "No. That night should have happened long ago. We've lost enough time, Silas. And I'm tired of just waiting around for the good things to happen to me, instead of taking them for myself."

And she slams her mouth back against mine, her hands gripping my hair.

I groan into her and she drinks it down as my cock hardens beneath us, feeling the tentative brush of her over my lap as she

moves. Her breath hitches when she feels it, and then she moves again.

"Stop that," I murmur against her lips, "or you won't be walking out of here tonight."

And when she pulls her face back, there are sparks there. "If you think I'm walking away tonight, then I'm not doing this right."

She shifts her hips, and my hands slide down to her waist.

"Are you sure?"

I will only ask once. I don't have the willpower to ask any more. Not when I want her so fucking badly, so much that my own hands shake where they hold her.

When she nods, her arms tighten around my neck as I stand, keeping her close to me. She yelps when I turn us, and she bounces down onto the mattress. "Oh!"

I lean over her, placing my hands on either side of her head as she blinks up at me. My towel is dangerously close to slipping off my waist.

"You," I say quietly, "are wearing far too many clothes, Anastasia."

She doesn't move her eyes from mine, but her hands drop down, to the hem of her black top. "Help me?"

I cover her hands with mine and help her pull the top over her head before tossing it to the side, leaving her bare to me, her breasts tipped with dusky brown nipples that stiffen beneath my gaze. I can't stop drinking her in, mapping her, tracing the hundreds of freckles dotting her skin with my eyes.

When she moves to cross her hands over herself, my hands snap out, gently circling her wrists.

"Don't hide yourself from me," my voice is fierce. "You're beautiful, Anastasia."

I told her something different, once. And regret stabs in my chest at the faint look of disbelief that flashes across her face.

"I didn't think we would ever be here," I say quietly. My hands take her wrists, lifting them and pressing them above her head. "Keep them up."

She nods, and it fucking *does* something to me when she obeys me. Almost as much as when she fights with me. I slide my hands down her skin, down the softness of her arms and over her shoulders. She stiffens when I cup her breasts, stroking my fingers over the hard nubs as her back arches, a breathy gasp slipping from her lips.

"These breasts were made for me," my voice is husky. "Every single part of you was made for me, Anastasia. And everything I see is perfect."

I will not let a day go past without reminding her, until those ghosts in her eyes disappear. Any response she might have given is swallowed by the choked sound she makes as I lean down, laving my tongue over her nipple before sealing my mouth over it and sucking.

My hands slip beneath her back as she moans, holding her up to me, one hand in the small of her lower back and my palm between her shoulder blades. Her hair trails out behind her, a mass of burgundy and cinnamon as though the fire in her soul is echoed by her body.

And tonight, she is mine.

I switch from one breast to the other, feeling her flex beneath my hands, her body undulating as she keeps her hands above her head, twisting and tugging the bedcovers. My stubble scrapes across her sensitive skin, and I should care more about that, but all I care about is that I'm leaving my mark on her, branding her with me.

When I finally lay her down, she's panting, her skin dewy and her forehead damp. I move back up to taste her again, our tongues dancing together as she lifts her hands to clasp around my neck, her breasts pressing against my bare chest.

Her hips lift, nudging me, and I break from her mouth to press a hot, damp trail down her neck, over her breasts and *down.* "So impatient, Anastasia."

When I reach the waistband of her leggings, I trace my tongue just above the hem in sweeping strokes until she groans. "More."

I'm not of the mind to deny her a single fucking thing. So my hand slides beneath, and I pull them down, reveling in the sight of her creamy skin being unveiled, inch by inch. She lifts her hips for me to pull them away, and I trace my finger over her soft black cotton underwear. "I hope you're not attached to this."

"Wait—,"

But she's too late. The material splits easily beneath my hands as I rip, and I let the strands flutter down as my eyes zero in on the cinnamon curls between her legs. "Oops."

"I only *have* three pairs, you know."

At her slightly tart tone, I glance up. She's propped up on her elbows, giving me full access to her mildly disgruntled expression. "Maybe I'll invest in an underwear store so I can rip them off you any time I choose."

She bites her lip as she glances at the panties I toss aside, and I realize that she's genuinely worried.

She should be wearing silks and satins, every piece hand fucking *crafted*, and she's worried about a pair of underwear from a damn multipack.

"I'll replace them," I promise softly. "I swear."

"You'd better." But her voice shakes as I lean down to press my lips against the soft curls. And when I push her legs apart, baring her to me, her gasp is my reward as I drop my mouth down and take a long, slow lick of her center.

"*God*," she gasps, and I reach up to flick her clit, my tone admonishing.

"We talked about that, I believe."

And then I lose myself in her scent, in her taste, sweet as fucking honey and yet tart on my tongue as she moans and thrashes beneath me, my name falling from her lips in stuttered, broken pleas. My hands grip her legs, lifting them to sit over my shoulders to give me more of her. I can't get close enough to her, to the fucking sounds she makes.

When I groan into her cunt, her answering keen makes me shudder. "Look at this pretty cunt, Stasi. All wet and pink and swollen for me."

I try to be gentle when I slide my finger inside her, then another, curling it up until I hit that magical fucking part of her that rips a cry from her throat.

"Are you ready?" I'm not sure who I'm asking with my question. Her, or me. "You're going to take my cock, Stasi. I'm going to watch it disappear inside you, and then I'm going to fuck you until you're so full of me you can't see anything else."

She sobs. "*Please*."

I try to breathe as I shift her a little further up the bed. The towel is already hanging off me, and I yank it away, throwing it before I turn back to her, pushing her legs as wide as I can get them.

My cock is already rock solid, weeping for want of her, and I stroke my fingers down it as she watches me with heavy, lidded eyes. Her lips part, and I imagine how it will feel to slide between those plump lips, to hold her against me and fuck her mouth, sink into her throat.

A bead of precum wells up, and I stroke my thumb against it, gathering the liquid. Reaching up, I swipe it against her lower lip, rubbing that small part of me into her. "Soon."

She swallows at the promise in my words, but her eyes are hungry as she looks down. And as I lean back, she grips her knees, pushing them open impossibly wider in silent invitation.

She has never done this before. Slowly.

But even as I repeat the words silently, it feels impossible as I line myself up to her entrance, notching the head of my cock against her as she inhales sharply. "It feels…big."

And the small laugh huffs out of me, unexpected as the tenderness that grips my throat at her sudden uncertainty. Slowly, I lean down, covering her until our faces are close enough for me to press my lips against hers.

"Breathe," I murmur, and as I sink that first, hot inch inside her, I open her mouth, capturing her breath with mine as she pants. "You feel like heaven around me, Anastasia."

Her eyes are closed as I press soft, gentle kisses to her skin. My hips flex, and I sink in a little more. Leaning down, I hook her leg over my arm, opening her up. "Taking me so well, Stasi. Jesus."

And our eyes lock as I push, her body opening for me as I take her, my cock bottoming out inside her as my muscles lock up in sheer fucking bliss.

I trace her face, taking in the flush of her cheeks, the stars in her eyes. "You're alright?"

She continues to breathe, in and out before she nods. I push the damp hair back away from her face. Wondering at her.

"Move with me." I flex into her, relishing the feel of sliding into her…this… possession.

Although I'm not sure who's possessing who, as I coax her to wrap her legs around my waist. As her hips bump against mine in clumsy, sweet need before she bites down on her lip and I chase the sting away with my own mouth, moving with her slowly until we are perfect, fluid harmony.

And I don't look away. I don't want to miss a single second of her pleasure as she chases it, her face raw and open in a way I have never seen before. Her eyes stay on mine as she moans, the sound reverberating deep in her throat as I push her harder, faster.

I bury my face in her neck, breathing her in as ripples of blinding need shoot down my spine. "Fucking perfect, Stasi."

And when she tightens around me, when her hands grip mine and she cries out my name, I can't stop myself from spilling into her with sudden, belated realization even as I moan her name like a fucking prayer.

Stasi. Stasi. *Stasi.*

And as I press her down into the soft bedding, pinning her with my hips and the weight of every fucking dream I've had of her over the years, I know that this will never, ever be enough.

She grins at me, her face damp and sparkling as she tries to catch her breath. "That was… unexpected."

And her voice sounds so fucking coy that my lips twist up. "Liar."

She laughs breathlessly, her head dropping back to the bed. "Maybe not *completely* unexpected."

I untangle us reluctantly, and she sits up as I come out of the bathroom, her gaze dropping to my hand. "What's that?"

"Lie back." Her cheeks darken as I nudge her shoulders down, the minx disappearing into sudden shyness as I spread her open. I can't stop myself to take a moment. "Fuck, you have a pretty cunt, Anastasia."

"Silas!" She squeaks as I press my finger in just a little, enjoying the view.

"But it's even prettier when it's full of me." I look up at her as I press the cloth into her, slowly cleaning her up and reminding myself to get her birth control first thing tomorrow.

She bites her lip. "This doesn't fix everything."

The world around us threatens to rush in at her words, to choke us under the weight of expectation and demand, but I hold it back. Just for tonight.

Tonight is for us.

"No," I say softly. I climb onto the bed, tugging the covers from underneath her and drawing them over us. Closing the world out. "But it can wait, Stasi. Everything else can wait for tonight."

I draw her against me, the warm skin of her bare back pressing into my chest. She stiffens, suddenly. "I'm cold. Do you have a… a shirt I can borrow?"

Frowning, I glance down at the top of her head, the mess of curls. I want to feel her, but I slide back out and fetch her a shirt anyway. "Here."

"Thanks." She sits up and shrugs it on, her muscles relaxing as I drag her back to me, my hand curling over her bare hip. Her voice is sleepy when she speaks. "What do we do now, Silas?"

I consider the question; my finger tracing gentle circles over her skin.

I should tell her about the dinner. Should have already told her that her stepsister is coming here, to Oakbourne.

But if she asks me why we've invited them… I don't know how to explain it without hurting her.

How would she respond if I tell her that I still need that final piece of proof? To know for certain?

I'm not an idiot. Deep down, I *know* that she's not what they say. I know how the truth can be twisted, that the public perception of Anastasia could well have been shaped into something so far from the truth that it's unrecognizable.

The Anastasia in my arms, soft and sated and mine, is not the one that they think they know.

But she did lie to us, before. For months, day after day.

And maybe I need to know how deep her shades of gray are before I can open myself up completely. Not that it will change anything. My hand clenches on her hip, and she wriggles, a small protest falling from her lips.

No. Anastasia belongs to me. To *us*. Because Rafe and Kit will not let her go, either.

And if it turns out that we were wrong all along, then I'll get down on my knees and beg her forgiveness for doubting her. I'll rip Crispin and his precious *Cinderella* into pieces for ruining her life.

I will make amends.

But first, I have to know the truth.

34 — Stasi

When I wake up, it takes me a few seconds to remember where I am. I squint, taking in the unfamiliar painted red wall opposite me.

And then my whole body flushes a deep, hot, matching scarlet as the memories flood in, the lingering ache between my legs a reminder of how it felt to have Silas moving between them.

Swallowing, I steel myself and glance over my shoulder. Searching, even as my stomach begins to twist itself into knots.

But the bed is empty. Morning sun blasts through the window, and I wonder absently how late I am to work as I stretch out, my fingers curling against the bedding as I shove down the lingering disappointment that he isn't here.

We made no promises to each other, after all. Even if his hands were so gentle on me, even as his words *invaded* me, until I opened up for him without question.

But I have no regrets. I wanted Silas last night. I came here, and I took him.

Although it feels a little like he's taken me.

Climbing out of his bed, I take a moment to tidy the bedding, drawing the ends of Silas's shirt around me as I pad across the room, collecting my clothes and bundling them up into a ball before I slip out.

Thankfully, I don't see anyone on the dash to my bedroom. One glance at the small clock next to my bed tells me exactly how late I am, as well as answering the question of where Silas is.

I wonder if he'll tell Kit and Rafe over breakfast.

Swallowing, I rush through my morning routine, showering quickly and scraping my hair back into a tight bun before darting back out of my room.

Where I promptly collide with a hard, very male chest. I bounce off it, an oomph escaping my lungs as warm hands land on my arms.

"Morning."

Silas watches me impassively as I stare up at him. He's freshly showered, too, his hair styled, impossibly perfect in a deep blue suit and white shirt. My eyes drop to the small patch of skin showing at the top, where he's left a button undone.

My lips were on that skin last night.

His hands softly squeeze the tops of my arms. "Anastasia."

Right.

"Morning," I rush out. My voice feels too high for the small space between us. "I'm just starting work. Sorry. I was… um. I was running late. Because – well, *you* know, but I didn't set any alarms, so—,"

"*Anastasia*."

He doesn't sound particularly happy. Falling silent, I rock back on my heels, my eyes dropping to the floor. "Yes?"

I jerk when his fingers curl around mine. "Come and have some breakfast."

"Breakfast?" I choke out. His hand tightens, and he turns, heading down the hall and very much towing me behind him as I stare at his back with my mouth flopping open.

"Breakfast," he says firmly. "Come on."

"Can I have my hand back?" I ask weakly.

"No."

My mouth snaps shut at his grumpy tone. I've never really thought about it, but if I had, I'm pretty sure his current mood would not feature highly in my *just-had-sex-for-the-first-time-and-now-he's-taking-me-to-breakfast* daydream.

So I glare at his back, but I still take a step closer to him as he pushes open the door to the dining room. Rafe and Kit are both there already, chatting quietly over their newspapers and steaming cups of coffee and they glance up, their eyes zeroing in on me.

And on my hand. Silas doesn't let go of me as he tows me to the table. He stops, staring down at Rafe. "Shift over."

My jaw sets as Rafe blinks, before he slides his plate down the table and moves, leaving a space between him and Silas's empty seat that Silas pushes me down into. "Stay there."

"Stop ordering me around," I snap back at him. "Just because we had sex last night, you don't get to act like a damn caveman, Silas."

My words sink into the silence. Rafe and Kit freeze, before they turn their heads to look at Silas. A dull flush spreads across his cheekbones as he glances down at me.

"I hadn't mentioned that yet," he grits out.

Oh. I sink back into my chair, praying for the ground to swallow me up. The atmosphere in the room ratchets up as Silas grabs a plate and starts spooning food onto it from the trays in the center. My stomach growls at the smell, and he eyes me as he puts the plate down.

And then he puts something else down next to my plate. Something small, and white.

"What's this?" I ask, picking the tablet up and turning it over in my hand.

But next to me, Rafe chokes. "Silas," he snaps.

Kit leans forward silently and pours me a cup of coffee, but I can see his lip twitching.

Silas sighs as he sits down. "Birth control, Anastasia. Until we can get you an appointment."

My eyes fly up from the small white tablet, my neck prickling with embarrassment. "And you had to give it to me *now*?"

"It's better with food," he says shortly. His eyes rise to meet mine, and they soften.

"I don't plan to stop being inside you anytime soon," he says quietly. My cheeks flush for an entirely different reason. "And since *everyone* in this room has a responsibility to keep you safe, I thought we should start as we mean to go on."

Beside me, Rafe stops breathing. Kit's hand pauses where he's pouring milk into my cup, violet eyes flashing to mine.

Silas says it so *easily*. As though he assumes… I start to cough.

"I just had sex for the *first fucking time*," I snap when I can catch my breath. Silas opens his mouth, but I hold up my hand, glaring at him. "I am not nearly experienced enough to deal with this conversation, Silas."

Nor am I brave enough to look directly at the two men keeping very, very quiet as Silas and I face off.

He holds firm. "It's better to be prepared. I won't apologize for protecting you."

I stare. "Protecting me? We're not in the fucking *middle ages*!"

Although spare me from the thought of giving birth to a mini fucking *dictator* like the man in front of me. He'd probably pop out with a whip in one hand and a clipboard in the other.

Silas crosses his arms. "Take the damn tablet, Stasi."

Mutinous, I pick it up and throw it into my mouth, chasing it down with a swig of coffee. "Happy now?"

Silas returns my glare with a smooth look, happy now he's gotten his way. "Am I happy now that I can fuck you without worrying about your health? Absolutely."

"Fantastic," I mutter sarcastically. I pull the plate towards me, picking up my fork and digging into the eggs. At least there's no bacon. "Demanding, overbearing ass."

I thought there was supposed to be some sort of post-coital glow?

A fluffy, pink kind of happy haze?

And all I get is a birth control tablet handed to me over breakfast and a public discussion on the future of my sex life.

I feel fucking *cheated.*

When I glance back to Silas, he's watching me. And he looks… guilty.

Sighing, I put my fork down, mentally resigning myself to the fact that this is probably not going to be a good day. "What is it, Silas?"

When he shifts in his seat instead of answering me, my eyes narrow and I cross my arms. "Go on. Hit me with it."

He winces, takes a deep breath. And then—

"Ella and Crispin will be here for dinner this evening."

The words take a moment to filter through the chaos in my head. My mouth opens, and then closes again. When I look around, all three of them are watching me, not even trying to pretend they're not.

"Right." My voice is wooden. "And what do you expect from me at this… dinner?"

Silence. It's Kit who finally answers, his voice soft.

"They will expect to see that the sentence is being carried out," he says quietly. Apologetically.

I nod slowly staring down at the table. As if I haven't been doing exactly what they've *told* me to do, every single day since I got here.

"Stasi," Silas says firmly. His dark blue gaze is locked on mine. "This is not to hurt you."

I offer him a small smile, shoving down the hurt. "It's fine. I understand."

When I stand, all three of them follow suit, chairs scraping back.

"Are you… okay?" Rafe's voice is low.

I want to tell him that I'd take Lazarus and his fucking slimy hands a hundred times over rather than have *Ella* here, poisoning this space. Ruining it in any way she can. Dripping her sweet, lying words into their ears until they fall for it. For her.

Everyone falls for her.

But this isn't *my* house. It's just another reminder. I don't get a say.

So I nod at Rafe. "Fine. I have work to do. If you'll excuse me."

But Silas wraps his hand around my wrist as I move past him.

"One night," he says. "They will come, and they will leave. This doesn't change anything, Stasi."

"So I'll serve you at dinner," I say softly. "And then… what? Serve you afterwards? Should I wait to be called, or should I wait in your bed until you're ready, Silas?"

I knew that last night wouldn't change anything. Knew that I would be back at work today and accepted it. But the thought of serving them, of serving my *bitch* of a stepsister at dinner, watching as she fawns over them and then Silas expecting me to be with him afterwards… I don't think I can do that.

He flinches. "It's not like that," he says hoarsely.

I hold his gaze. "Isn't it?"

And then I tug my hand from his, and he lets me go.

35 — Rafe

Stasi sweeps out, leaving us with the weight of our decision. Silas stares after her.

"We should have told her why we've invited them," Kit murmurs.

But I shake my head. "What if we're wrong, Kit? What if we're building all of this up in our heads? Just because we want to believe the best of her doesn't make it *true*."

He drops back down into his seat. "We're not wrong. But would it change anything for us?"

Neither Silas or I respond. There's no point, not when we all know the answer.

None of us will let her go again. No matter what.

"Maybe not," Silas says finally. "But if Ella Cooper is lying about what happened, if Stasi *has* been sentenced unfairly, then we have something else to consider. Because she shouldn't be here at all."

We might lose her anyway. Even if we got on our knees and begged her forgiveness, it might not be enough. It wouldn't be enough. Why would she choose us, when we didn't believe in her?

For once, I opt against heading into the city, choosing to hole up in the study instead. Kit is already at his desk, but we both work in silence, lost in our own thoughts.

Both of us avoiding Stasi.

When it's time to get ready, I don't think I've done a single productive thing. My jaw is tight as I stalk downstairs, down to where Kit and Silas are already waiting.

"They've just pulled through the main gates." Silas is stiff as a board, I nod, my eyes moving to the kitchen door. I can hear movement on the other side.

I want to check on her. But I doubt she'd welcome it.

So I focus on why we're here. Plastering a smile across my face as Silas opens the door, and Crispin strolls in with a nod.

He turns and holds out his hand.

And in she sweeps. Ella Cooper is resplendent in her deep scarlet dress, layer upon layer of silk broken up only by the diamonds across her neck. Her blonde hair is swept up in an elegant bun, a matching tiara nestled in her hair. She takes Crispin's hand, but her eyes are already on me as he leads her across the room.

"Introductions!" Crispin's voice is jovial enough, even if I can hear the thread of concern underneath. Maybe he's worried

that we'll spill his financial worries to his future bride. "Darling, meet Rafael Tate. Rafe, this is Ella – but you already know that!"

He laughs, and Silas steps forward to pull him into conversation as I sketch a light bow. "The pleasure is all mine, Your Highness."

I let my eyes skate across her, examining her and not bothering to hide it. Ella is beautiful enough, but she carries herself with the air of someone who knows exactly how attractive they are and uses it.

I can't help but compare her to Stasi. And she comes up… lacking.

Twin spots of color appear on her cheeks as she blushes, but her eyes are bright, examining me just as closely.

"The infamous Rafael Tate." Ella takes a step closer. "I have heard so very much about you since our last meeting."

"All good, I hope." I keep my voice low, and she slides a look towards Crispin before turning back to me. She leans in a little closer, one elegant finger reaching up to brush across her bare collarbone.

"Perhaps," she murmurs as her eyes move up to mine. "Perhaps not."

My lips curl up into a slow, lazy smile as Kit appears at her elbow. Ella steps back and looks between us, her mouth opening. "Fascinating. You really are identical, but for your hair and eyes."

She sounds scintillated, as Kit takes her hand and presses a kiss to the back of it. "A pleasure to meet you properly at last."

She titters. "The pleasure would have to be mine, on this occasion."

And as she watches us, I see it.

The greed. It flickers in her eyes, just for a second before she blinks it away with a soft smile, glancing to her fiancé. "Shall we go in? I confess that I'm rather… *hungry*."

"Well, we can't have that." I offer her my arm, Kit doing the same on her other side. Ella slides her hands into the crook of our elbows, and we escort her towards the dining room. Behind us, Silas and Crispin follow, the murmur of their conversation floating over us as Ella's fingers dig into the material of my shirt.

Kit and I exchange looks over the top of her head. A brief glance, but full of unspoken words.

I think we already have the measure of Ella Cooper. But the night is still young, and the worst is yet to come.

And Ella's fingers tighten as we walk through the doors, her breath hitching as her eyes land on Stasi.

She stands quietly next to Ellen, both of them waiting for us next to the selection of steaming dishes. The room drops into silence as Ella inhales. "Anastasia."

And her fingers… they shake. Stasi barely looks up before her eyes move back to the floor, but her brief glance takes in the sight of Ella between us.

And I catch the flicker of hurt.

Looking away, I drop my eyes back to Ella, my hand reaching for hers and squeezing her shaking fingers. She glances up at me, her eyes misty.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "It's just… this is harder than I thought it would be."

And she moves a little closer into me. Her whisper is loud enough for Stasi to hear, and in the corner of my eye, I see her stiffen.

"I understand," I say, patting her hand. "Let's get everyone seated, and perhaps a glass of wine will help."

We move over to the elegantly laid table. Warm golden light flickers from the two candelabras as I seat Ella in the same place Stasi sat this morning, sinking down next to her. Silas takes the seat at the head of the table with Crispin next to him, opposite Ella. Kit sits on his other side.

"Well," Ella says. "This is lovely."

From this position, Stasi is behind us. But Silas's voice rings out in demand. "Wine."

She moves to him first. Head down, she fills his glass with the wine from the cellar we decanted earlier, moving around to Crispin and then to Ella.

Ella looks up at Stasi. "How… how are you?"

Her voice is soft, sweet. Unsure.

Stasi places Ella's glass down on the table heavily, and it wobbles. "Fine."

Her response is a snap, and Silas clears his throat. Crispin raises an eyebrow from across the table. "Still an unmannered brat, I see."

All of us stiffen, but none more so than the woman who snatches my glass, filling it almost to the brim before she shoves it at me.

I can feel their eyes on us, and my voice is harsher than it needs to be when I snap. "Behave."

Deep brown eyes move to mine, and she curtseys.

Fucking *curtseys*.

"Of course, *sir*." Her tone is vaguely mocking as she backs away, filling Kit's glass before she moves back to stand against the wall. My hand tightens around the fragile stem.

Ella glances over her shoulder, and then she turns her attention to Silas.

"Since my sister won't answer me," she says quietly. "How have things been here?"

Silas's eyes flick to behind me. "We're settling in. These things can take some time to adjust to."

Crispin swigs from his glass. "You're lucky you're hidden away down here, Silas. They're dropping like flies in the city from this damn virus."

Silas frowns, his eyes flicking to me. "It's that bad? I thought it was just a flu."

Crispin shakes his head. "It is, but some have taken it badly. The hospitals are full. Spreading like damn wildfire. They expect it to run its course in a few weeks, but we're taking the hit in the meantime."

He takes another swig, emptying his glass and waving it towards Stasi. "More."

When she steps up beside him, he twists to face her with a disgruntled expression. "So. You look to be in reasonable health."

"Was she not supposed to be?" Kit's voice rings out. He tilts his head when Crispin turns to him. "I don't believe mistreatment was part of the agreement."

He humphs. "I believe it was to be a fair reflection of Ella's experience."

I glance down to the woman at my side. She's watching Anastasia, a small smile tilting the corner of her lips. "Perhaps you could give us some further details, and we can look into it."

The trace of a smile disappears, and she dips her head. "I'm not sure that I would be comfortable… taking about it."

Her voice wavers and drops away. "It was so very difficult, you see."

The small scoff is audible.

"I think we're ready to eat, Ellen." Silas flicks his fingers, and they begin to carry over the plates. We settle into the rhythm of formal conversation during the first course, and I keep my focus on Ella. Keep her glass topped up, entertaining her with stories and jokes, Kit chiming in with just enough regularity that her attention is torn between us. Keep my voice low, my body turned towards her.

By the time that dessert comes out, her cheeks are flushed, her voice embellished with a slight drawl from the amount of wine she's consumed. Crispin is ten sheets to the fucking wind, his eyes hazy and words slurring even from across the table.

So I lean over, my finger tracing her arm. "Was the meal to your liking, Your Highness?"

Goosebumps pop up in my wake, and she looks up at me. Her eyes drop down to my lips. "Oh," her voice is breathy. "Yes. Very much."

"Excellent," I purr. "And perhaps a tour of the house, after dinner?"

Stasi slams the plate down in front of Ella, and a few drops of cream spatter against the scarlet dress, staining it.

Ella leaps up with a curse, rounding on Anastasia. Any sign of the sweet, soft princess disappears under the savage flash of temper that twists her face as she raises her fist. "You nasty little *idiot*."

And I jump from my seat as Stasi *flinches*.

Silas holds his hands out, sliding between them with his back to Stasi. "My sincerest apologies, Your Highness. Anastasia – go and get a cloth. Now."

Stasi takes a step back, then another before she turns and nearly runs from the room. Ella grabs a napkin, dabbing at the silk.

"I'm sorry for making a fuss." Her whisper is shaky. "It's just – bad memories."

She pulls the napkin away, offering us a tremulous smile before she draws herself up. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to visit the bathroom."

She glances at Crispin, but he just pours himself another glass of wine as she leaves.

Kit is on his feet too, and we lock gazes. Silas nods in silent agreement when we turn to him.

And we follow.

36 – Stasi

I stumble from the room, blindly turning towards my bedroom instead of the kitchen. I close the door and press myself against it, closing my eyes and taking deep breaths.

I need a minute.

More than a minute.

I need to not go back into that fucking room tonight. I don't want to watch them with her, don't want to see Rafe's hand touching her *fucking* arm.

And the smug look in Ella's eyes as she looked at me, the knowledge between us, her silent message that she has won and I have *lost* – is almost too much.

And them. After everything – I thought we had made progress, that they were starting to *see* – but if tonight has proved anything, it's that all I am to them is a commodity. Something to pass the time with.

Silas hasn't even looked at me, when last night he didn't look away while he was *inside* me.

"Stupid, Anastasia," I breathe. My vision blurs, the prickling at the back of my eyes threatening to spill over. "So fucking stupid."

Everything that I thought we had, that we were staring to find again. It all feels like ashes in my mouth, nothing but a package of pretty lies.

And I have to go and face them again. Another round, another knife in my chest.

But they'll be leaving soon. Dinner will be over, and Ella will leave.

Another hour, maybe two at a maximum.

I can do that.

Not that I have a choice. But I take another, fortifying breath and spin, pulling the door open.

Pink lips twist up. "*There* you are."

Ella shoves me back into the room with a hard push to my shoulder, leaving the door ajar. "I've been walking up and down the hall looking for you."

She sounds irritated. I cross my arms as she looks around my basic room. Her lip curls. "They seem to be taking very good care of you. I'll confess that I'm a little disappointed. It hardly seems fair, does it?"

I stay still, watching her. “You’re fucking delusional, you know.”

She makes a show of checking her pale pink nails, studying them. Her fingers brush against the ridiculously sized stone on her finger. Her engagement ring. “That’s no way to speak to your future queen, Anastasia.”

And then she straightens. “I don’t think I’m very happy with this arrangement after all. Crispin promised me that you were being punished. You don’t *look* like you’re being punished.”

My hands tighten into fists. “What more do you possibly want? Twenty years of my *life*, Ella. Do you truly hate me so much that even that isn’t enough for you?”

“Yes,” she hisses. Her face darkens, mouth twisting as the last bit of the façade she keeps up slides away. “I *despise* you.”

“I never did anything to you,” I force out through the anger in my chest. It feels like it’s growing, that it’s going to swallow me up if I don’t hold it back. “I never hurt you, Ella. We both know it. And I’m the one with the fucking scars to prove it. Now get out of my way.”

I try to push past her, but her nails bite into my arm as she shoves me back.

I ball up my fists, fully intending on making her move, but she waggles her finger at me. “Touch me, and you’ll be back in the main prison before midnight. Parrish is missing you dreadfully, I hear.”

I stiffen. “What the hell do you want?”

Ella’s laugh is low and vicious. She clicks her tongue. “Since I can’t seem to trust in Crispin to dish out an appropriate punishment, I’ll have to do it myself.”

She twists, opening up my wardrobe as I stare.

“What the hell are you doing?”

She glances at me from over her shoulder. “You don’t seem to have any belts here. Why is that?”

My whole body goes cold. Numb.

“If you think that I’ll stand here and accept that without a fight,” I grit out, “you’re wrong. And I don’t give a damn what happens to me because of it.”

She pushes the door closed with a sigh as I try to move past her again. “Such a pity. You used to be far more agreeable. I suppose I’ll have to make do.”

Her hand whips out, and she backhands me across the face.

My head yanks violently to the side, and I stumble into the wall, smacking my face against it. A small, pained noise rips from my throat as ringing erupts in my ears.

“There,” Ella says primly. I blink through the tears at her. “That’s better. I do hope you haven’t damaged my ring, Anastasia.”

My hand raises to my mouth. The pads of my fingers come away stained with red, the cut in my lip dripping. “You need help,” I breathe. “Truly, Ella.”

She only smiles. “Do I, though? Or are you so desperate to prove yourself that you hit yourself in the face? Such a petty, jealous way to live, Anastasia. Perhaps in another few years, you’ll be more accepting of the consequences of your actions. I’ll have to make visits on a more regular basis.”

She walks past me, pulling the door open. “You really should put some ice on that. Your face is quite vile enough without the swelling.”

Her heels click against the wooden floor as she walks away, and my ass hits the floor with a thump as I lean my head back against the wall.

I must have a fucking punchbag for a face. First Lazarus, now Ella. The slicing, sharp pain fades to a dull ache as I sit there, cautiously prodding at the blood with my tongue until I’m certain the bleeding has stopped.

Slowly, I get to my feet, wondering how I’m going to explain this. Or maybe Ella is already spinning her fantasy tale, eyes wide in false sympathy at my strange behavior. I’ll make a stop at the bathroom, see how bad it looks first.

With a sigh, I glance up to the doorway.

And the two men filling it stare back at me.

Kit takes a slow step forward, his hands raised. His eyes are fixed on my mouth. “Stasi.”

His voice is rough, guttural. His finger brushes against my mouth, just barely.

I swallow. Search for an explanation. “I… I was just…,”

“We heard,” Rafe says behind him. His tone is frigid. “We heard all of it. You don’t need to make up an excuse.”

His tone is ice cold as he steps inside, flanking Kit so they’re both surrounding me.

“All of it?” I ask weakly.

Rafe’s nod is slow. He reaches out and turns my head to the side, examining it. “This wasn’t the first time she’s hurt you.”

There’s no question in his words, and I shrink back, away from the judgment in his tone. “I didn’t do anything, I swear—,”

And I let out a muffled grunt, as Rafe’s arms wrap around me. “Jesus Christ,” he snaps into my hair. “Do you really think we’re blaming *you*?”

Tension lines every one of my muscles, stopping me from sinking into him, from drawing on the warmth of his body to chase away the ice in my own. “That is normally what happens.”

"Stasi," Kit breathes. His face is drawn. "I didn't know she was hurting you."

I shake my head as best I can, even with Rafe wrapped around me. Slowly, I step away from him. His hands drop to his side, balling into fists. "It's not… it wasn't all the time."

"One fucking time," Kit snaps. "One time is too damn much."

"Kit was right." Rafe's words make us all fall silent.

And his face… there's so much pain there. Realization, grief, understanding. "It wasn't you, was it? It was always her."

My laugh feels like sandpaper. "And all it took was seeing her slap me across the face to realize it."

Rafe closes his eyes. "I knew."

His voice is gravel, low and pained. "I already knew. I just… I just needed to be sure."

The words send a prickle of foreboding along my spine. "What do you mean? You needed to be sure?"

When he doesn't answer, the suspicion hardens. Solidifies. "You invited her here. Because you… what? You wanted to prove something?"

His face twists. "No. It wasn't like that."

I take a step back from him. I can't even look at him. "Every time I think you cannot possibly hurt me anymore, you go ahead and prove me wrong, Rafe."

His head snaps back like he's the one who's been hit.

But I'm the one taking all the fucking punches. Over and over again.

"And you." I turn to Kit. "You… knew about this?"

His violet eyes are dark. Almost black in the low light. "It wasn't like that. They needed to understand, Stasi. We need to fix this."

"And now we can," Rafe adds in a low tone. "She's not going to get away with this, Stasi."

He looks so determined. "Why didn't you just tell me? Why let me go through all of that – tonight – and not say anything?"

Rafe's eyes drop. "Because… I needed to see it. Silas needed to see it."

"So you arranged it," I breathe. "And my word wasn't enough for you, Rafe, was it? Why would you believe me? Why would you trust *me*?"

He opens his mouth to argue, and I hold up my hand.

"I get it," I say, my throat tight. "I honestly do. I lied to you once. But don't try to tell me how sorry you are now, after you put me on display and paraded me in front of her. After you've spent the whole night fucking flirting with her. Own your shitty decisions, the way I owned mine."

"I'm sorry." And he *looks* sorry. His face pale with shock, the sorrow and regret fucking radiate from him. "None of it was real. Not a bit of it."

My laugh is sad. "It felt real enough to me. I'm going to clean up my face now. I'm still expected back there."

"You're not going back," Kit says firmly. "Rafe will make your apologies, and mine. We're going to clean up your face."

Rafe hesitates, but then he nods. "This discussion isn't over."

"It feels pretty done to me." I poke at my face. "Unless you have any other surprises you'd like to tell me about?"

"I deserve that," he says in a low voice. "And more. But I don't want any more secrets between us, Stasi. I'm done with them."

He's gone before I can respond. Kit nudges me towards the door. He's silent as we head down towards the kitchen, moving straight past the door to the dining room where voices echo out. I glance around for Ellen as we head down the steps, but she must still be upstairs.

"Sit." Kit settles me onto a stool, coming back with the first aid kit. "I fucking hate how often I've had to do this."

"Well." I mumble as he presses gauze against my mouth. "People do seem to enjoy hitting me."

"That's not funny," he snaps.

I lift one shoulder. "Wasn't supposed to be."

"Silas is going to lose his shit," he murmurs, pulling the gauze away to look. "You don't need stitches."

"Silas can go and fuck himself on a very sharp, very spiky cactus."

Kit chokes at my snarled words. "He's going to be furious. But more at himself, I would say."

"Good." I hiss as he spreads cool cream across the cut, his thumb smoothing the sting away. "Although he's not the one who's been imprisoned for something they didn't do."

Kit pauses, his fingers dropping from my face as he stares down at me. "I want to know it all," he says finally. "Every bit, Stasi. From the beginning to the end."

I hold his gaze. "I know. But not now."

"No," he agrees, "but soon."

He tosses the used gauze away, washing his hands before he settles next to me. I let out a breath, but it turns into a squeak as Kit slides his hands around my waist, lifting me onto his lap.

"I want to hold you," he breathes into my neck. "If I'm holding you, then I won't go up there and throw her out of our house."

His warm breath tickles my skin. “I wouldn’t be averse to that, you know.”

Kit draws back, his palm cupping my cheek. “I would do that. In a heartbeat. But we have an advantage over her at the moment. More than one, really, but if she doesn’t know that *we* know, then she can’t plan for it.”

His thumb traces gentle loops across my face. “You’re not on your own anymore, Stasi. I said it before, and I meant every word.”

I want to believe him. I do.

“I don’t trust anything good, Kit.” His eyes flick to mine in question, and I look away.

“Everything good gets taken away from me,” I say softly. “Every single thing, my entire life. It’s better not to expect anything.”

“So you can’t be disappointed.” He follows my lead, and his shoulders tense. “That’s no way to live, Stasi.”

“It’s the only way,” I correct him. “And it took me a long time to learn that particular lesson.”

“I hate that you ever had to.” He rests his forehead against mine. “But I accept the challenge.”

My smile is small, but it’s there. “What happens if we manage to… I don’t know. Prove it?”

Kit’s mouth opens, but it’s not his voice that answers.

“If we manage to prove your innocence?” Silas steps down from the last step, his eyes on my face. Rafe is right behind him. “You’ll be free.”

“Good.” I look away from his expression. “So I can run far, far away from men who think they know everything?”

Beneath me, Kit stiffens.

Everyone stiffens.

“It will be your choice,” Silas says tightly. “But we need to get there, first.”

I cross my arms. Silas stares at me. I stare back.

“I’m waiting,” I say finally. “For my apology.”

He looks as though he’s accidentally bitten a wasp. “I’m sorry,” he says finally.

I turn to Kit with a questioning glance. “Did you hear something? Because I think a flea just made the smallest damn apology in history.”

To his credit and my disappointment, he doesn’t laugh, although his lips twitch up.

Silas lets out a growl. “*Stasi*.”

“Nuh uh.” I hold up my hand, cutting off his grumpy tone. “Want to try that again, with some meaning behind it?”

Silas’s brows dip into a low frown. And then he’s stalking forward. He picks me up from Kit’s lap, placing me on the counter.

And then he *kneels*.

“What are… what are you doing?” I glance at Kit and Rafe for help, but they’re watching Silas. Rafe looks especially grim.

“I’m apologizing,” he says quietly. “On my fucking knees. And it will not be enough, but consider this my starting point, Anastasia.”

All I do is stare at him.

“First,” he says softly. “I’m so fucking sorry for that night. For making you leave, when you begged me to help you. For not letting you take your things with you. For all of it. I was angry, and upset, and I took all of that out on you instead of just taking a single damn second to breathe. I was so, so fucking wrong. And I have regretted the loss of you every single day since.”

Oh. That’s… not a bad apology. Not the one I was expecting, but I’ll take it.

He raises an eyebrow at me. “May I continue?”

But he’s still an asshole. Crossing my arms, I tilt my chin up in invitation.

“Second.” He looks down at the floor. “I apologize for using your position here against you, when you first arrived. I used it to punish you because I was still angry. I was unfairly angry at you for leaving, and I was angry because of my father. I thought that in the absence of your mother, I could punish you instead. And it never should have happened that way.”

He fumbles, and his cheeks darken. I wonder when the last time was that Silas Tate issued an apology to anyone.

“This was your home,” he whispers. “And this has always been your home.”

His words hit me hard. Silas clears his throat without waiting for a response. “Third… I should have known that you would never have done those things. Because I know *you*, Anastasia. And I think… I think I did, really. But I allowed my anger and my grief to cloud my judgement, and the only victim of that was you. And even when I knew, it was somehow easier to pretend I didn’t, because then I would have to face my own actions.”

His hands circle my ankles. Holding on to them, as if for support.

“I’m sorry we never came for you,” he says raggedly. “When we should have found you years ago. You should never have been alone for a single second, Stasi. And finally, I’m sorry that we didn’t speak up when we should have. I have no excuse for that, but one.”

He looks up at me. At my damp cheeks.

“I wanted you,” he says softly. “Wanted you here. And when we found out that it was you…I saw an opportunity to bring you

home, and I took it without a second thought."

I swipe my hands over my face. My voice shakes when I speak. "Silas…,"

"I'm going to fix this," he promises. His eyes are steady on my face. "We are going to fix this, Stasi. And when this is done… you still have a home here. Always. But it will be your choice, from now on."

I can't look at him. So I look down at my hands instead, twisting my fingers together. "My choice?"

He nods. "No more lists. No more cleaning. No more demands."

I glance up incredulously. "Don't make promises you can't keep."

He tilts his head back, a low, broken laugh slipping out. "I will try to tone down the demands."

I nod. "Much more achievable."

He looks up at me, more vulnerable than I have ever seen him.

"I'm not asking for your forgiveness," he says abruptly. "But I'm going to work to earn it, Stasi. I promise you."

Slowly, so carefully, I reach forward, and run my fingers through his hair. His eyes close.

"You missed an apology," I say, tugging lightly. His eyes fly open, and I catch the panic there. "For tonight. You overbearing ass. You should have told me they were coming. And then you ignored me. All night."

He presses his lips together. "If I had looked at you, then they would have known. Better to ignore you than to put you at risk. Although I will apologize for not telling you why they were here."

I eye him, but he looks unrepentant. I suppose I'll have to take it.

And I feel a little warmer now.

"Okay," I breathe. "But do not fuck this up again, Silas."

He groans, pressing his head into my leg. "I wish that I could promise that. But… I probably will fuck up again. Never intentionally."

Good enough. "Then you're on a test run."

"A test run?" He pulls his head back, staring at me in slight disbelief as he gets to his feet.

I cross my arms. "Take it or leave it."

"Then I guess I'm taking it," he murmurs. I suck in a breath as he grazes my lip. "She hurt you."

"Not for the first time," Rafe says. His knuckles are white as he holds his elbows. "But it will be the last."

I open my mouth, but he's already turning away, stalking out of the kitchen.

37 – Kit

"Rafe?"

He lifts his head up. His eyes are bloodshot as hell, and he holds up the glass in his hand. "Brother. Nice to see you. Both of you."

"How much have you had?" It's been barely an hour since we were in the kitchen, listening to Silas strip himself bare for Stasi. And Rafe is… absolutely trashed.

He shrugs. "Don't know. Don't particularly care."

I glance around the music room. He's hidden away in the corner, and he waves his hand as I look down at him. "Don't mind me. Play away."

I press my lips together. "We all have a share of the blame here, Rafe."

He laughs, sarcastic and cold. "Do we? You always believed in her. Silas… she loves him. It's plain as day to see. Me, I just keep on getting her hurt. Every fucking step I take ends with her *hurting*, Kit."

I take a seat next to him. "The decisions belong to all of us."

He looks down, moody and obstinate. "I made it so much fucking worse for her. When she came. Everything I did was designed to hurt her."

"So, apologize," I say. "Make it up to her, Rafe."

He stares across the room. "I wouldn't even know where to fucking start. I've put a damn wall between us and I can't fucking *climb* it."

"One step at a time," I suggest quietly. "Brick by brick. The wall will fall eventually, Rafe. But it doesn't happen overnight."

He doesn't respond. I know my twin well enough to understand when he needs to work through things at his own pace, so I leave him there, sliding onto my piano stool. I play quietly, enjoying the music, until a soft pair of hands land on my shoulders.

Stasi slips in next to me. Her hair is wet, and she fiddles with it. "I think I'm going to need more conditioner. And another hairbrush. I seem to have lost half of the one you gave me trying to tackle the nest."

She sounds apologetic.

"You can have anything you want," I say softly. "We'll look tomorrow, get it ordered."

A cough behind us makes her jump. She nearly flies from her seat, twisting with her hand over her heart. "Shit, Rafe. You

scared me."

"Sorry." His voice sounds scratchy. "I'll be back."

We both watch as he disappears out of the door. Stasi's shoulders drop a little.

"One of Rafe's faults is his temper," I say quietly, tracing my finger along the keys. "He's rash to anger, and he makes decisions. He's worried that some of those decisions make him… irredeemable. To you."

Stasi sucks in a breath. "I'm not sure he cares very much about what I think of him."

I hold her gaze. "Then you would be wrong."

Her eyes soften. "Do your brothers know how much you fight for them?"

My lips twitch up. "No more than they do for me."

"You're a good man, Christopher Tate."

I wince, and she laughs. "Still hate being called Christopher?"

"Yep." I play a light, quick melody. "Although I suppose I could get over it, if you have a preference."

Maybe.

Her hand closes over mine. "I like Kit."

When I turn to her, her face is close to mine.

Her voice drops to a whisper. "It's so easy to love you, Kit Tate."

And my heart stutters inside my chest. Stasi brushes her lips over mine. Once. Twice. And I sink into her, my fingers dropping from the keys and sliding into her hair as she moans, opening up for me, even as I try to be gentle, to mind the corner of her lip.

I've kissed her before. And yet there is more between us now. More honesty. More emotion. As if the people we were then are catching up to the people we are now.

I break apart from her. "I love you."

I have always loved her. I never stopped.

I will never stop loving Anastasia.

"Kit." She kisses me, harder, and I drag her onto my lap, my hand cupping the side of her neck as I slowly press her backwards with her legs around my waist until the keys ring out in disjointed song.

When I trace her side, trailing the material with my fingers, she gasps into my mouth, sitting up. "Take it off."

My hands slide up her stomach, pushing the thin black material with it until I can hook it over her head. And then my head drops, pressing kisses down her chest, over the cotton of her bra.

Down.

I hook my fingers into her waistband, and she lifts up her hips in silent acquiescence. I peel her trousers and her underwear off at the same time, slowly revealing her to me, inch by inch.

"Stasi," I breathe. She watches me, her eyes dark and amber in the light. As I shift her, nudging her to sit on the keys. And then I spread her open, hooking her legs over my shoulders.

When I drop my head to her slit, laving it with my tongue in lazy strokes, she jolts in my hands with a moan. The sound blends into the sound of the piano beneath her as I find her nub, flicking it with my tongue, nipping it gently with my teeth as her toes curl against my back.

"You taste like caramel." I look up at her, her hair damp and trailing over my piano, her freckled skin so soft beneath my hands that I have the urge to pinch myself. "I dreamed of you here, Stasi. Coming apart for me."

I bury my face into her again, unable to get enough of her as she pushes herself into me, demanding more.

So I give it to her. Harder, my tongue sliding into her until I can't get any closer. I move it inside her and she jerks around me, her fists tightening in my hair.

"Kit."

The sound of her cries is better than any melody I could possibly dream of.

When she convulses around me, I drink her up, sucking every fucking drop I can from her pussy until my face is fucking covered in her. Still not enough.

She sits up, and I suck in a breath as her hand drops down to my trousers. I'm swollen, so fucking hard for her, and she squeezes my cock lightly, drawing a hiss from my lips.

"Off," she says, her voice husky. Her fingers undo the zip of my jeans, and I stand, shoving them down before she slides off the keys and onto my lap, hot and bare and wet and so impossibly perfect that I groan into her shoulder. "I'm going to come before I'm even inside you."

She presses her lips to my cheek. My neck, moving down, tasting me. "Then we'd better hurry up."

Our movements are jerky as she lifts herself up, and I line my cock against her entrance. Her head falls back as she sinks down, inch by inch.

I want to watch her pussy, watch her swallow me up. I want to pin her against the fucking piano and take her hard.

But I don't want to hurt her, not when she was a virgin until very recently. So I suck in a breath and stay where I am,

watching her face as she finds her rhythm. Her hesitant movements are so fucking sexy, the hitch in her breathing a song as she moves up and down. My hands slide to her bare back, holding her to me as she buries her face in my neck.

"Jesus, Stasi," I rasp, as she twists her hips. "You feel fucking perfect, baby. So fucking perfect on my cock."

She clenches against me. "Say it again."

"Fucking perfect," I repeat. One hand moves to the back of her head, and I lift her slightly so I can push back into her, rolling my hips against hers. "Such a perfect, hot, wet pussy, taking my cock like such a good girl."

She buries her moan in my neck, her hands curling around my neck and gripping tightly.

"I'll never get enough of this," I grunt, speeding up. The sweet little noises rippling from her throat spur me on, making me move faster, losing fucking control as I buck my hips and she takes it, her cries like music as they ring out into the air, entwined with the sound of our fucking. "Never get enough of your hot little cunt gripping me."

She convulses around me, her muscles contracting and pulling me impossibly deeper as she screams out her release and I follow it with a roar, jetting hot pulses of release into her. Marking her from the inside. Savage satisfaction fills me as I rest her back on the piano, slowly pulling out and watching my release run out of her pussy.

"Your piano—," she shifts as if to get up, but I stop her. My fingers drop down, circling her entrance, gathering up my seed and smearing it over her cunt.

"What a mess," I say softly. Her eyes fly to mine. "We'll need to clean it up."

And I gather more of it up in my fingers, stroking her pussy before I raise my fingers to her lips. "Lick, Stasi. Taste what you fucking do to me."

Her cheeks flood with scarlet, but she leans forward, her lips rounding as she tentatively licks my fingers. Slowly, giving her time to pull away, I push them into her mouth. "Suck, baby."

The hot, sucking sounds shoot straight to my dick. I gather up more, feeding it to her, and something hot swoops low in my stomach as she takes it from my fingers, her eyes on mine as she takes everything that I give her.

"You like that." My voice rumbles with satisfaction when she nods. "You like the taste of cum, Stasi?"

She licks her lips. "Maybe."

"Good," I say. She gasps when I line myself up, sliding back into her heat with a low groan. "Because I'm looking forward to feeding you again."

38 — Stasi

When I wake up the next morning, I am very much *not* alone in the bed.

Kit is wrapped around me, his chest hot against my back. When I stir, his arms tighten, a vague noise of complaint falling from his throat. Even his leg is entangled between mine, his knee brushing against my pussy.

Which is… sore.

I flush with sudden memory, and then I'm turned.

"Morning," Kit whispers. His throat sounds gruff, rough with sleep and something deeper. His eyes travel down unashamedly. "I want you again."

He says it with the confidence of a man who took what he wanted several times last night. Four, in fact.

He leans in to kiss me, careful to keep to the side of my mouth, before he travels down with his lips.

"Kit," I grumble, pushing at his shoulders. His raven hair is messy and adorable when he pops back up.

He gives me a smile that belongs firmly in the bedroom category. "I just want to say good morning."

"Well, my face is up h– *oh*."

He disappears beneath the covers, and my eyes roll as a hot insistent tongue presses against me. Hands slide beneath my hips, holding me up, and a needy sound slips from my mouth when his lips wrap around my clit, sucking in hot pulses of electric fire that ripple up my spine.

And then he stops. I stare at him, mildly aghast when his head pops back up.

And he *winks*.

Kit Tate should not be allowed to wink. On anyone else, it might be cute. But it's devastating on him.

"I'm sorry," he says smoothly. "You were saying?"

I reach blindly for the pillow, smacking him with it. "Get down there and finish what you started."

His dimple flashes. "As my lady commands."

He disappears again, and my laugh is replaced with a moan as he sinks inside me, his fingers dancing across my pussy like I'm the piano he loves so much.

I tell him as much on our way to breakfast, and his grin is unapologetic. "I think I have a new favorite instrument. I intend to play it *often*."

I'm biting my cheek, trying to hide my smile when he pushes the door open. And I walk straight into his back. "Ow."

"Sorry." He tugs me around and in front of him. Enough for me to see Silas and Rafe sat at the table, confusion on their faces.

"What's the matter?" I ask. And then I notice the empty table. "Where's Ellen?"

"We just got here." Silas frowns down at his empty plate. "I hope she's alright."

"I'll check." Ducking away from Kit, I pad down the steps to the kitchen. "She's not down here!"

At my call, Kit follows, glancing around at the empty counters. His mouth turns down. "Check her room."

I stop him when he goes to knock, sudden fear gripping my throat. "Let me."

When a voice calls out, relief slumps my shoulders. Pushing open the door, I glance around. The room is just as neat and tidy as I would have expected. Ellen groans, pulling herself up from the bed.

"Stasi," her voice is a croak, her eyes bright. "I'm coming. I just… I don't feel very well this morning."

And she coughs. A long, hacking cough that has me striding up and gently pushing her shoulders down when she tries to stand. Frowning, I feel her temperature. "You're really hot, Ellen."

She protests weakly, but she's already asleep again by the time I move back out. All three of them are standing in the hall. As my eyes sweep them, I notice Rafe's bloodshot eyes.

But he looks as concerned as the others. "Ellen is sick. She can't work."

"That's fine," Silas says immediately. "We'll fend for ourselves."

I give him an incredulous look. "You cook?"

To his credit, he doesn't even try to lie. He crosses his arms. "I can try."

"We'll all try," Kit says smoothly. "What's wrong with Ellen? Does she need anything?"

I frown. "She's very hot. Burning up. And… she has this really vicious cough."

Everyone stills.

"What?" I ask.

Silas looks around. "That fucking virus. They came here last night – could have passed it on."

"I've been in the city most days," Rafe points out, his voice quiet. "Could have been me."

"Either way," Silas says grimly. "It's in the house now. How close did you get, Stasi?"

They all turn, staring at me as though I'm about to sprout a fever in front of their eyes. I cross my arms. "Not that close. I'm hard-wearing. Don't worry about me."

Kit presses the back of his hand against my forehead, and I slap him away. "This virus is nasty, Stasi. And fucking contagious, too."

"Fine," I say shortly. "So more of us might get it, right? Possibly all of us. We prepare now, just in case."

All three of them look a little lost.

Sighing, I roll up my sleeves. "We'll use the sitting room. It's the biggest."

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A few hours later, I glance around. The couches have been pushed back against the walls, making space for the mattresses spread out across the floor, each one made up with fresh bedding. Kit walks in with his arms full of pillows. "If we don't catch it, at least we can have a good slumber party."

I stare down at my list.

Another damn list. But at least this time, I'm not on my own.

Silas pops his head around the door, green eyes meeting mine. "Ellen's temperature has jumped."

"I'll come now," I say immediately. He looks like he's going to argue with me. "I've already been exposed to it, Silas. If anything, I'm the *only* one who should be going in."

"Not going to happen." His voice is hard. "Tell me what you need."

"Basic medications. Is the first aid kit stocked?"

He nods. "We keep a lot here, just in case. We're a long way from the nearest hospital."

"How long?" I ask, and his mouth tightens. "Two hours."

"Okay. Get everything together and put it on the table in the sitting room, so it's easily accessible. If someone can get the bottled water up from the cellar, that would be helpful too, so we don't have to go up and down. I'll check on Ellen, and then we'll get some simple meals on the go. Stock up, so we don't have to worry for the next few days at least. Towels, spare bedding, all of that can be put against the far wall in the sitting room so it's close by."

And then, we wait to see who else might fall ill.

Silas watches me, his eyes considering. "You're good at this."

I had to be, once. But there's no time for that discussion now. So I duck into Ellen's room. She's laying back against the covers, her forehead damp. When I say her name, she doesn't answer.

"Ellen?" My voice rises. "Silas!"

He appears in a moment. "She wasn't like this a minute ago."

Concern tightens my throat, threatens to paralyze me. Forcing it down, I try to think. "You called the hospital?"

He nods. “They can take emergency cases, but anything else is being turned away.”

“Okay,” I whisper. I kneel next to Ellen, pushing back her hair. Even her breathing sounds harsh, loud and crackling. “Ellen. We’re going to move you into the main room, okay? So we can keep an eye on you.”

She doesn’t respond, and I swallow as Silas carefully gathers her up, following behind them as he walks quickly to the sitting room.

Kit is there, and I grab his arm, trying to pull him out. “You need to leave. Silas and I have both been around Ellen, but you haven’t.”

His brows drop down. “You must be joking. I’m not leaving you.”

“Please.” I’m trying not to panic. Ellen looks so weak as Silas lays her carefully on one of the mattresses. “Someone needs to stay away, Kit. Just in case.”

“Stasi’s right.” Silas sounds steady, but I can hear the worry. “Out, Kit.”

He purses his lips. “I’ll stay out of the room, for now. I’ll go and find Rafe. We’ll sort out some food.”

Relief squeezes my chest. “Good. Okay.”

I drop down next to Ellen as he leaves. Silas hovers as I dampen a small towel, dabbing at her forehead. “What about paracetamol?”

I shake my head. “It won’t work. I’ve given her some ibuprofen. The temperature… it can be a healthy response to fight off the infection. We just need to wait.”

But as the day passes into evening, Ellen doesn’t get any better.

I choke down the sandwiches delivered to the door by Kit. Shoo him out of the kitchen long enough to pull together a big tureen of soup.

Ellen rouses enough to take a few sips. “Not as good as yours,” I say softly. Her eyes crack open.

“Not so bad,” she whispers. “Good job.”

“Thanks.” I want to cry, but I push it back. Silas makes calls, trying to get someone, anyone with actual medical experience out here to help. But everyone is either sick themselves or busy elsewhere.

He swears, and I move over to him. “We’ll be okay.”

“Ellen is bad enough.” His voice sounds hoarse. “But if the twins go down – if you go down. I don’t know what to do.”

“Hey.” I feel his forehead. He feels warm, but I don’t know if it’s just the stress. “Sit down for a minute. I’ll get you some water.”

He drinks a full glass. “This was not what I expected when I said I’d spend every day making things up to you.”

“Oh, dear,” I tease, even though my heart feels anything but light. “Silas Tate not getting what he wants. The world is going to stop turning.”

He eyes me over his glass. “I’d spank you for that, if I had the energy. You need to sleep.”

“I’m fine,” I say softly. “Why don’t you lie down?”

He doesn’t argue with me. Not even a little bit. Although he refuses to take off his shoes, laying back on the mattress with his arms crossed. “Wake me up in ten minutes if I fall asleep.”

I don’t respond. He’s already asleep.

And his temperature creeps up, hour by hour. My stomach flips, twists, as I move between him and Ellen, checking them constantly. The only sound they make is coughing, the noise digging into my head, making it ache.

Dawn is creeping through the windows when Kit arrives at my door. “Stasi.”

His eyes are bright, his voice slurring my name. Too bright. And then he coughs, a hacking, rattling sound.

Shit. Shit, *shit.* “Where’s Rafe?” I ask him as I pull him over to a mattress. He mumbles something. “Kit!”

“Outside,” he rasps. “Walk.”

My head jerks towards the door. “When?”

I shake him, desperation making me harsher than I’d like. “*When*, Kit?”

But his eyes are closed. A sob slips out of my throat as I look around.

Don’t panic.

Most people come out of it within three days. That’s what Silas said, what the doctor on the phone told him.

I can get them through until then.

I check them once more before leaving, my heart in my throat as I push the back door open. “Rafe!”

There’s no answer. I take a few steps, squinting out towards the orchard. A figure is sitting beneath the tree, and my feet slowly break into a run.

I race down the path, my heart pounding in my throat. “Rafe!”

Nothing. And as I drop down beside him, I already know what I’m going to find. His skin is flush with the fever, his eyes barely open. “*Stas…i*.”

“I’ve got you.” I cast a look towards the house. It suddenly feels like thirty miles away. “I need you to help me, Rafe.”

He tries. He really does, but his legs won’t hold him up enough to walk more than a few steps before he collapses to his

knees. “Leave… me here.”

“No.” My voice is strong, strong enough to cover the shaking of my hands. “I need you to get up. *Please*, Rafe.”

And I manage to pull him up, sliding his arm over my shoulders. He’s heavy, and my muscles begin to scream as I drag him, inch by painful inch. My lungs scream, but I don’t stop.

“Nearly there,” I gasp. “So close, Rafe. We’ve got this.”

He doesn’t answer, but his legs are still moving. The sob breaks free as we reach the kitchen door. “Okay. We’re going to the sitting room. Silas and Kit are there, Rafe. Just a few more steps.”

The steps.

I want to scream as we reach them. Scream, cry, throw something.

But I drag Rafe’s arm higher. Holding onto it tightly, as I lift.

Three steps.

Three fucking *mountains.*

But we make it. And I gasp into Rafe’s ear. “If you die on me after I’ve dragged you all this way, I will *never* forgive you.”

I nearly drop him onto the mattress, but I lower him down carefully, my arms shaking, weak and numb. My body folds and I collapse down beside him, sucking oxygen into my lungs.

One minute. Just one, just to catch my breath.

And then I crawl over to Kit, pressing my cheek against his chest. His breathing rattles, but it’s there. Ellen next, her breathing a little better than it was, even as her temperature still rages.

And then I crawl over to Silas. “Silas?”

His eyelids flicker, and I lift myself enough to get some water, spooning it carefully into his mouth.

“I need you here,” I choke out around the lump in my throat. “Everyone is sick, Silas. And I don’t know what I’m *doing*.”

A rasping breath is my only reply.

I can’t lose them. I won’t.

I try to use his phone to call someone, anyone, but I can’t even get through the locked screen. All I can do is pray.

I move between them, giving water and cool presses and talking to them quietly. I’m next to Kit when there’s a shout. My head jerks up.

Rafe.

He’s thrashing against the mattress, soaked with sweat when I reach him. My hands press into his shoulders. He cries out again, twisting violently.

“You’re okay,” I breathe, even as it feels like my heart snaps inside my chest. Because he’s crying, tears rolling from his sunken eyes. “Rafe. It’s Stasi. You’re going to be okay. This is going to pass soon.”

It feels like a lie. But he settles as I coax him back down, taking a little water from me before he starts to twist again.

“Stasi.” My head jerks up from his chest. “Stasi.”

“I’m here.” Frantically, I run my hands over him. Checking his eyes. But he’s not aware of me, even as he mutters my name again. “I’m right here, Rafe.”

“’M sorry.”

I blink. But he says it again. And then again.

My name and an apology. Over and over again. The tears stream down my face unchecked as I wipe his away, taking his hand and squeezing it. “Tell me when you’re awake, Rafe. Wake up and tell me.”

But he doesn’t wake up.

None of them wake up.

Not for a long time.

39 — Silas

My chest feels like it's on fire. But as I cough, trying to clear the itching from my throat, my eyes open. The ceiling swims into view, white whirls of plaster that don't look familiar.

Frowning, I twist my head to the side. I'm laying on a mattress. Kit is next to me, his breathing steady. And when I struggle up, I see Rafe. Stasi is curled up next to him, sleeping, her head on his chest. Ellen is asleep in the final bed.

And the memories return in a slow creep, my head foggy as hell. I don't know how long I've been out. I reach slowly for my phone, but the battery is dead.

There's a glass of water next to me, and I drink it down almost in one. It tastes a little stagnant.

"Kit," I croak. His eyes slowly creak open, and I breathe a sigh of relief. "You hear me?"

Slowly, he nods. "Fuck." His voice is a groan. "The hell was that?"

I feel like I've been hit by a truck. And then they've reversed. And driven over me again.

But I drag myself to my feet, testing my balance. My head is clearing more with every moment, and I head over to check on Rafe. His pulse beats strong and steady beneath my fingers, and I close my eyes in relief before heading to check Ellen.

Both of them, still here. I stop next to Stasi, kneeling down and brushing hair away from her face. Her eyes are closed, but her breathing is quiet as she sleeps. I don't wake her.

"She's alright?" Kit asks drowsily.

I have no idea how long she's been going without sleep. If she was the only one left… my chest tightens. "Yeah. I'm going to have a shower. Freshen up. I'll be back."

She took care of all of us.

I plug in my phone in the study before carefully heading to the bathroom, testing my balance. The last thing we need is for me to pass out in the damn shower. But it passes without incident, and I quickly dress before heading back to the study.

I stare down at the phone, counting backwards in my head to the morning we put the sitting room together.

Seventy-two hours, give or take.

Jesus.

I stop at the kitchen. The soup feels cold on the cooker when I brush my hand against it, so I opt for sandwiches, making a stack even though the bread feels slightly stale.

Better than nothing.

Kit is sitting up when I return, his face groggy. "How long?"

"We found Ellen three days ago. When did you go down?"

He squints. "Next morning, I think. Early."

That makes it two days. I wonder when Rafe went down. Ellen is older, so it makes sense that she's not roused yet. And if Rafe was last… maybe Stasi wasn't on her own for long.

I pass Kit the plate of sandwiches and a bottle of water. He bites into one as I check on Rafe again. His eyes flicker. "Rafe?"

"Stasi." He rasps her name, and I look down at her.

"She's right here," I say softly. "She's asleep."

He coughs, a grinding, horrible sound. "Everyone ok? Kit?"

Kit leans over, a sandwich in his mouth. "Here. Everyone's fine."

"Good," he breathes. Coughs again. "That's good. I was… outside."

I frown. "When?"

"Passed out," he whispers drowsily. "Orchard. Who… who brought me in?"

Kit and I stare at each other. And then we look down.

At the sleeping girl.

"Fucking hell," Kit says softly. "You don't think…,"

"You think she wouldn't?" I murmur. He groans. "She absolutely would."

It's a fucking hell of a trek to make with an unconscious man. How the hell she managed it, I don't know.

Rafe's eyes open a little further, and he glances down, squeezing her fingers. "Stasi."

She needs proper rest. So I lean down, my hand stroking against her arm. "Stasi?"

And then I stop. A foreboding steals into my chest, sealing up my lungs as I jump from her arm to her forehead, frantically feeling the familiar touch of fever beneath my fingers.

"Fucking hell." My voice is shaking. "*Stasi*."

She doesn't respond. Her head lolls to the side when I tilt it.

Kit reaches past me to check, his hand trembling as he feels for himself. "But her breathing… her breathing is fine."

I drop down, pressing my head against her chest. And my eyes close at the slow, almost silent rattle. "No, it's fucking not."

No. No. No.

It's a chant inside my head as Kit and I lift her, lift her onto the mattress Kit's only just left next to Rafe. Her head flops to the side.

How long has she been like this? Without water, without anyone to watch over her?

Kit is on her other side, Rafe struggling to pull himself up. "Silas."

And his voice… it's full of terror. I press my fingers to her pulse.

And my own stutters at the complete and utter lack of anything beneath my touch.

She's dying in front of us.

"Compressions," I choke out. "Thirty, then air."

I lock my fists into position.

Push down, hard.

Again.

Again.

As I count, inside my head.

Don't you leave me.

Don't you dare.

Not when we've just found you again.

Not when we have so much more ahead of us.

Don't you fucking dare leave me, Anastasia.

I stop, and Kit covers her mouth and nose, pushing the air into her lungs as her chest inflates. Rafe staggers next to us, dropping to his knees.

I check her pulse. "Again."

I have so many plans for us.

For all of us.

A lifetime of memories to give you.

A lifetime to cherish you.

But I need you to live, Stasi.

Live.

40 — Stasi — eight years ago

I keep my arms crossed.

"Get out of the fucking car," my mother snaps. "You're embarrassing me."

I can barely keep the tears at bay, even though I haven't stopped crying. "Take me back. Please."

"Don't be ridiculous," she snarls. "Get out of the damn car now, or I will press fucking charges against them, Anastasia."

Slowly, I untangle my arms.

And I get out of the car. A man stands there, tall and thin with a hooked nose. He doesn't smile. And neither does his daughter.

She's beautiful. Tall, like her father, with flowing blonde hair and lovely deep blue eyes in her blue floral dress. But her plump lips are pursed in clear displeasure, her gaze icy as it rakes across me.

"I thought you said she was pretty?"

It takes a minute for her words to filter through the pain inside my head. Inside my heart.

I blink, as my mother laughs, a tinkling sound. The girl's father says nothing.

"Oh, Ella," my mother says finally. "I don't remember saying that!"

And I turn to look at her.

That's it?

Ella sniffs, turning her back on me as she walks into the house. The man – Martin, as my mother introduces him – gives me a cool nod.

"I hope you behave yourself in my house," he says quietly. "I won't have any trouble. This is Ella's home."

My nod is slow.

I miss William.

I miss *them.*

***

I can't hear anything over the *screaming*.

My mother sobs, the back of her hand pressed against her mouth as she lays back on the couch. "How will we live? He's

ruined us! Selfish, selfish man."

The two officers glance at each other. A radio crackles. "We're very sorry for your loss, ma'am."

***

Ella won't stop screaming. I shake her shoulders. "Ella!"

She doesn't respond. So I take a breath, and I slap her.

She silences immediately.

"I'm sorry," I rush out, the guilt filling me. "I'm so sorry. They say to do that – I read it somewhere. Can I get you anything, Ella?"

She sniffs. "Coffee."

I try to smile. "Okay. Whatever you need."

***

"Where the hell is it?"

My mother rounds on me. I'm on my knees, cleaning the kitchen floor. "What?"

"Don't you fucking lie to me, you little thief," my mother snarls. "The ring! What have you done with it?"

My heart pounds, but I keep my eyes steady on hers. "I haven't seen it."

"Liar," she hisses. "We need that damn ring, Anastasia. We have no money left!"

Ella sits at the table, sipping from the cup of coffee I've just made her. "She's a little liar, Angelica. I'd beat it out of her, personally."

"Don't tempt me." My mother throws herself into a chair. "When you've finished with that, Anastasia, my bathroom needs to be cleaned."

"Mine too," Ella cuts in, her lips curling up. "We all need to play our part without the staff here, after all."

I open my mouth, and then close it again.

"Fine."

And when I leave the room, I slide my hand down to check.

It's there.

Safe from *them.*

And soon, I'll be away from them. My college application was posted yesterday. I'll apply for every grant under the sun, but I'm going.

***

"Mother?"

I say the words softly. But Angelica cries out, her body painfully thin as she writhes on the bed. My heart in my throat, I wipe her down again before I pull the blankets over her, trying to shield her from the cold.

Ella leans against the door.

"We need more painkillers," I say to her over the sound of my mother's cries. "Can you go and get some? Please?"

"I'm busy." She stares at my mother, her lip curling in distaste. "I have a date."

Good. If she's eating, that means more food for mother. I can't stretch our money anymore, the bare minimum left barely enough for one person to survive, let alone three.

And I really thought that I could go to college.

"Fine. I'll go."

"Before you do, I need you to fix my dress."

When I stare at her, she shrugs. "It's either that, or I can't go."

I grit my teeth. "*Fine*."

***

I stare at Ella. "What do you mean, you *sold my bed*? What the fuck, Ella?"

I just want to sleep. I'm so fucking tired.

And my mother is so weak. The doctor told me she needs to be in hospice care.

But we can't afford that.

Ella sniffs, waving the notes in the air. "It means we get to survive another week. They came to collect it earlier. I can't fucking live like this for much longer. It smells like death in here."

I flinch. "Shut up."

She only rolls her eyes. "You'll be more comfortable in the kitchen anyway. It's warmer in there. And then when Angelica goes, you can have her bed. So don't be so dramatic about it."

I should be used to it by now. But the sheer coldness of her words still manage to shock me. "Do you have any empathy at all?"

Her lip curls. “Not for you.”

No. She keeps it all for herself.

***

“Give it to me!”

The belt bites into my back again as I cry out. “I don’t have it!”

“You’re a liar,” Ella snarls. “I *saw* you with it. I always knew you’d taken it, you thief. Now hand it over, Anastasia, or I swear I will make your life a fucking misery.”

You can’t possibly make it any worse.

I keep my mouth closed. I don’t say a word as the belt whips against my skin, burning lines of pain.

“I need it,” she screams. “It’s important, Anastasia. It could change everything for us!”

I curl into myself, bracing for the next blow. My hand over the corner of my bra, where the ring is safe.

You’re not having it. It doesn’t belong to you.

***

I stand in front of the casket. Alone.

It’s the cheapest one I could get.

The priest offers me a small, sympathetic smile. “Just you today?”

I twist around. But there’s nobody else.

“Just me. Please start.”

My feet are heavy on the long walk home.

My mother is dead.

I am an orphan.

But… I’m also free.

Free to leave Ella behind. And start again, somewhere new.

There’s a small amount of money. Not enough for anything much beyond a bus ticket. But enough to escape.

My key sticks in the lock. Frowning, I twist it again.

“Anastasia Cooper?” I turn as the shadows detach from the wall. “Sister to Ella Cooper?”

“She’s not my sister.” The words are instinctive, and the officers look at each other grimly.

“Is… is she alright?” Sudden worry hits me. “Is she hurt?”

“Can you come with us, please?”

She is not hurt.

Quite the opposite. Ella is thriving, tucked away under the protection of the Crown Prince.

What a story she has woven.

And they don’t listen to me, when I tell them they have it wrong.

They don’t listen to me at all.

41 – Rafe

I have never been a religious man.

But as I kneel by her side, Silas pumping the blood around her body and Kit breathing air into her lungs, I pray.

To every fucking deity out there.

You can have me.

Take me instead.

Just don't take her.

I make a dozen bargains, a dozen exchanges in my head. And when Kit shouts, his voice jubilant, it takes me a moment. I almost expect my own heart to stop beating as I stare at her chest. At the faint rise and fall.

It wouldn't matter. My heart belongs to her anyway.

But as the minutes creep on and that rise and fall continues, I realize that I'm not going to die today.

Silas forces water into me, he and Kit working to strip the bed beneath her and put clean sheets on. Then Kit lifts her up, as Silas slowly peels the top from over her head to put a clean shirt on her.

"What the fuck is that?" He stops, staring down as Kit and I crane to look.

It takes me a moment to remember. To remember Ella Cooper, peering into her wardrobe.

You don't have any belts here.

"Belt marks." It sounds wrong on my tongue, so I say it again when they both look at me. Kit closes his eyes.

Silas doesn't speak at all. His jaw tightens as he gently tugs the shirt over her. Something drops down, and I reach out. "What's this?"

And his eyes flare wide with shock. "That's – give it here."

He takes it, turning it over in his hands. "This is Mother's wedding ring."

Kit and I turn to stare at him, as the shock flares in my chest. "What?"

"She kept it," he says slowly. "Angelica took it from Dad's bedside table. She must have… she got it back. Somehow."

He sounds as though there's not enough air in the room.

And then he leans down. And he slides the ring onto her finger.

"It fits," I say softly. His eyes are wet when he looks at me.

“Like it was made for her.”

42 — Stasi

"I'm not going to a fucking ball."

Rafe sounds outraged. Slowly, I open my eyes. "You're still here."

"Stasi." His voice is full of relief, and he presses his lips against my hand.

And then I'm surrounded. Silas, Kit and Rafe, all three of them around my bed. Silas leans forward, picking up my other hand. "How do you feel? You've been out for a few days."

I frown. "I feel… I feel okay. Was it bad?"

"You nearly died," Rafe says quietly. He looks terrible. "Kit and Silas had to resuscitate you. Twice."

My eyes open wider, taking them all in. None of them look like they've slept for days, and I jerk my head to the side. "Ellen – where's Ellen?"

"Ellen is fine," Kit says gently. "Thanks to you. We're all fine because of you, Stasi."

They're all watching me with warmth in their eyes. Rafe presses his forehead against my hand. "I'm sorry."

I blink. And my lips tilt up. "You did say that while you were unconscious. Quite a few times."

Green eyes watch me.

"I'm serious," Rafe says softly. Kit and Silas step away from the bed, giving us privacy as Rafe leans in. His hand cups my cheek. "I thought I'd lost you. You were dying in front of me, Stasi. And I realized that I'd been an idiot."

"Only then?" I choke out. Rafe helps me sit up, holding a glass of water to my mouth that I finish before I look back at him.

"You were an idiot," I say quietly. He looks down. "But so were Silas and Kit, Rafe. Well. Mostly Silas."

There's a cough from across the room, and I have to smile.

"If you haven't worked it out by now," I say gently, "I'm a little bit lost for you, Rafael Tate. For all of you. Even though you absolutely *are* an idiot. And you have a lot of making up to do."

The smile slowly creeps across his face. "I'm in need of a partner in crime. Care to fill the spot?"

I take a breath. "Can't fill a spot that was already filled. And I took that place years ago, Rafe."

His laugh is low. "You did."

I reach out for his hand, but my eyes drop to my own.

I freeze, staring down at the ring.

Silas appears next to me. He takes my hand in his, tracing my fingers. “You kept it. All this time.”

I can’t stop staring at it. I’ve never put it on. But it fits me perfectly. And then I look up at him.

“I should have told you,” I whisper. “But… I don’t think I was quite ready to part with it, yet. I haven’t been without it all these years.”

“Well,” Silas says carefully. He curls my fingers over the ring. “Now you don’t have to be without it, ever again. It’s yours, Stasi.”

I jerk. “You can’t. It’s your mother’s ring – I can’t keep it!”

He leans down, pressing his lips against mine. “That ring is for the woman I intend to marry, Anastasia. That’s what my dad always told me. And there is no one else that I plan on marrying anytime soon.”

I can’t speak, my heart filling up.

But then I croak. “Marriage?”

He hums. “I’m the oldest. Seems only fair that I get to make you Mrs Anastasia Tate. The twins can be your secret lovers.”

Rafe flushes. Kit wiggles his eyebrows at me.

“Right,” I breathe. “So… that’s all sorted, then.”

“Not quite,” Kit says, folding his arms. “There’s something else we need to do first.”

43 — Stasi

"We'll be fine."

I watch as Ellen nudges Silas out of the door. He looks delicious in his black tuxedo. And grim. Almost as grim as I feel.

"You know that if I could guarantee your safety, you would absolutely be there."

I nod, slowly.

I do get it. I understand why I can't attend the ball where they're going to take Ella down. In public.

Silas sounds vaguely pleading. "Stasi."

"Silas," I mimic. "Go. Bring me her head."

He hesitates. "Metaphorically, you mean. Because she's probably going to—,"

"I know," I snap. "And I'm annoyed that I don't get to see it. But it's not going to happen unless you *get a move on*."

He offers me a small smile. "Rafe is going to record it."

The man in question presses a kiss against my cheek as he passes me. "We can watch it in bed. With popcorn."

I feel slightly mollified. Kit cups my cheek, and then he's gone too.

And we're… left behind.

Ellen turns to me, clapping her hands together. "Right. What are you waiting for?"

I stare at her. And her mouth curves up into a mischievous fucking smile that I've never seen on her face before.

"Do you want to go to the ball, or not?"

My mouth opens. And closes again, as she raises one eyebrow at me. "Ellen. They're going to be furious."

And she *shrugs*. "They'll live."

"I don't have a dress," I say weakly.

But Ellen only grins at me.

"Yes, you do."

***

I can't stop smiling. "I feel like a princess."

Ellen taps my arm. We're squeezed into her small red car that she uses to do the grocery shop every week. "Don't forget. I'll be there at midnight. Just in case you need me."

My eyes threaten to fill, and I swallow them back. "Thank you."

"No need to thank me," she says primly. "As long as that woman gets what she deserves."

Her voice softens. "I'm very glad that you came to us, Anastasia."

"Stop it," I wave my hands in front of my face. "I'm *leaking*, Ellen."

She snorts, and I stare up at the palace as she hands me a piece of paper. "Rafael's invite. But it doesn't have his name on it, so you're fine."

I bite my lip. A mixture of excitement and nausea swirls in my stomach. "This could go really wrong."

"Pfft." Ellen waves her hand. "Those boys won't let anything happen to you. Keep your mask on, and *go*. Enjoy yourself."

I slide out of the small space with a bit of effort, fluffing up my skirt as I turn around. "Do I look okay?"

Ellen gives me a thumbs up, but her eyes look damp. "Like a princess. Now *go*. Or you'll miss it."

I take a breath.

And then I move, hustling up the steps.

It's a very different experience to the last time I came here. Nobody is waiting to throw fruit at me. There are no jeers, no nasty laughter directed my way.

No. Instead, I receive several appreciative glances from the soldiers on duty. The men at the doors barely glance at my invite before waving me through.

I make my way through the hall, down towards the throne room. Ella's portrait stares down at me from the wall.

This is it.

And I breathe in, bracing myself as the men guarding the doors look me up and down.

They step forward, opening both doors.

And I step inside.

44 — Silas

I see her first.

She stands at the top of the steps, and she's shining like a fucking star. Heads begin to turn.

How could they not? My breath catches inside my throat as she glances down.

Uncertain.

I push through the crowd, not bothering to apologize as I shove people out of my way. I can see others moving towards her, too, and I have no intention of letting any fucker near her.

Especially when she looks like that.

The dress shines under the light. Almost blue, almost silver, it glints in the light, layer upon layer of crystals catching and sending light shimmering in every direction. And as she raises her dress slightly to walk down, I see the shoes.

The familiar, glass, heeled shoes.

The silver lace on her face doesn't hide her trepidation as she catches sight of me at the bottom, waiting. I glance away, my eyes landing on a male with entirely too much fucking lust in his eyes.

"Move away," I say in a bored tone. "Now."

He leaves. Quickly.

And I'm there to meet her, my hand held out as she slips one delicate, silver glove into it. Stasi blinks up at me. "How much trouble am I in?"

I turn us, smoothly moving back into the crowd. "Enough that we might have to spread the punishment over several… sessions."

I hear her gulp even over the orchestra. "Oh. Well… Rafe bought my dress."

I groan. "Of course he did. And I assume Ellen was his partner in crime?"

"It's not her fault," Stasi says quickly. "Don't blame her."

"Oh, I'm not." I draw her out onto the dance floor. "I'm going to give her a raise."

Stasi blinks at me as I bow.

"Dance with me, Anastasia," I say softly. "I want to dance with the most beautiful woman in the room."

And her eyes light up. She curtseys, perfect motion.

And then we move. She's starlight and fire in my arms, and she laughs as I spin us. "I didn't know you could dance."

"My father made me take lessons. I've never appreciated it more."

And we dance, to the sound of her laughter. I can feel eyes on us, inquisitive, looking at her. And as the song draws to an end. I take her hand in mine, moving to a door and nudging her through it. "Where are we going?"

"We're here for a reason," I say quietly. "So you may as well get the full experience."

She sucks in breath, as I pull open another door and nudge her through it. Kit and Rafe turn, and Crispin throws up his hands. "Oh, perfect."

"Crispin," I drawl. "Mind your manners when you speak to my future wife."

He stops. "*What*?"

Kit and Rafe draw Stasi back, keeping her between them as I approach. "We seem to have a little issue."

Crispin swallows. "Do we? I don't quite recall – if you could jog my memory—,"

I lean in. "The *problem,* is that your future wife is a liar. A liar, and a fraud."

Crispin draws himself up. "Now, see here, Silas—,"

I grip his throat. His Adam's apple bobs beneath my hand as he swallows.

"You will listen to me," I say coolly. "Nod if you understand."

He nods.

"Ella Cooper is a liar," I say softly. "Anastasia was telling the truth. You have been deceived by a pretty face. Not for the first time, but you may come to regret this one."

I release him, and he massages his throat. "And why… why is that?"

"Because I'm calling in your debt, Crispin," I say shortly. "All of it. Every penny."

For a moment, I wonder if he might faint. He reaches out, staggering before he finds a chair and drops into it. "Now, then, Silas, let's talk about this like grown men."

"Indeed." My voice is cold. "There is one option to stop this. It makes you the one in charge, Crispin."

He brightens a little. "Really?"

"For tonight," Rafe drawls behind me. "Don't get too excited, Crispy."

When I tell him, I'm not expecting his response. His face actually… brightens. "So I don't have to marry Ella after all?"

I'm fairly certain that we all have matching expressions of disbelief on our faces.

"No," I say drily. "Not if you do exactly as we tell you."

He doesn't seem to be disappointed. And when we leave, he offers Anastasia his arm.

"My apologies for the mix up," he murmurs to her. "We'll get this sorted out in a jiffy."

We walk out into the main hall. And as people see Stasi, holding gingerly to Crispin, the whispers start up. In a sweeping, growing wave that moves across the room.

Right to where Ella is seated, a plethora of adoring, empty-headed men in front of her.

Her eyes lock onto us as Crispin murmurs to a footman. She stands, and sweeps towards us in her bronze silk down. "Crispin? What's the meaning of this?"

Her voice is shrill. I'm sure Crispin shudders before he takes the microphone from the footman, holding it to his mouth.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announces. "I beg your attention for a moment."

The orchestra cuts out, all faces turning to us. And people step back, creating a space for us, with Ella opposite. She's squinting at Anastasia, standing tall beside Crispin.

And we spread out to flank them.

"Thank you." Crispin smiles. "I'm afraid that I have a rather… difficult announcement to make."

His words send the people in the room into a whispering frenzy, and he raises his arm for quiet.

"It has been brought to my attention," he says gravely, "that we, the Crown, and the public of Sorelle have been *gravely* misinformed."

The one thing Crispin has in his favor is his ability to hold a crowd. Everyone hangs on his words, total silence spreading.

"It grieves me greatly to say it," he says gravely, "but Ella Cooper, you are under arrest."

Silence. Total, shocked silence, as heads turn to Ella. Then towards Anastasia. And the ripples begin again.

Ella Cooper stands there with her mouth open. "What?"

"You are under arrest for fraud and false representation to the crown," Crispin says in a sad tone. "You have lied to us, Ella. Lied to me. Blamed your sister, when in fact it was you all along."

And Ella turns towards Stasi, her face lighting in realization. "Oh, you little *bitch*."

The crowd begins to titter at her tone, and Ella glances around. Her face crumples. "Crispin. Please. I love you. You can't possibly believe *her*."

"New evidence has come to light," Crispin says sagely. And then glances to us, his eyes widening in panic.

But Anastasia is ready. She steps forward and turns.

Showing her bare, scarred back to the room.

Gasps ring out, and even Ella's eyes widen as she surveys the damage. When she steps forward, we're there, blocking her from getting any closer.

"You're not touching her," I say softly. "Not ever again."

She scoffs. "This is ridiculous. Anastasia, tell them."

Stasi stays silent. And then—

"I'm sorry, Ella," she says, her voice ringing out. "But I must not tell lies."

Ella screeches, but we're already walking away as guards slip past us.

"Home, then?" Stasi asks.

I hum. "Seems a shame to waste a good party. The orchestra will start back up in a minute. Crispin won't want to waste it.

As if on cue, a waltz rings out.

Rafe holds out his hand. "My dance, I believe."

45 — Stasi

We stagger into Oakbourne Manor, full of champagne and food and giddiness.

I take a breath as Silas slides his tuxedo jacket from my shoulders. “Home.”

It’s good to be home. Carefully, I reach down and slip the glass shoes from my feet, placing them on the table.

“Why on the table?” Kit enquires, and I shrug.

“They’re far too pretty to be on the floor. They deserve to be seen.”

“Well,” Rafe teases. “Everyone in Sorelle society saw them this evening.”

“And everyone else will see them tomorrow,” Silas says softly. “There was a lot of press at that party.”

“Vindication.” I take a deep breath. “It feels good. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank us,” Silas says softly. “We should have done it the first day we saw you again.”

There’s guilt in his tone, and I reach up, pressing my lips to his.

“We move forward,” I breathe. “Together.”

“Which reminds me.” Silas draws something from his pocket and hands it to me. I turn it over. “What is it?”

They’re all watching me as I slide it open. And my eyes widen at the number on the cheque. “What is this?”

“Back pay,” Silas says quietly. “You worked for Ella for years, Stasi. And then for us. You deserve to be compensated for it.”

“We billed Ella’s part to Crispin,” Rafe says with a small smile. “Seemed only fair.”

I turn the cheque over and over in my fingers. “I could… go to college?”

“You can do whatever you want,” Kit says softly. “As long as we’re there with you.”

Rafe slides his hand into mine. “Shall we go and watch it again? With popcorn?”

I laugh. “No. But… I think I’m ready for bed.”

Silas leans in, kissing my forehead. Kit follows his lead. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Late,” Rafe says firmly. “Very late.”

And he lifts me as I laugh, running up the stairs and pushing open his bedroom door. He tosses me onto his bed, and I bounce in a pile of tulle. “I need to take this dress off.”

But he shakes his head, a gleam in his eye. “Later. Leave it on for now.”

My mouth opens, but he's already there, pressing his lips into mine. "I feel like I waited forever for you, Anastasia Tate. And it was worth it."

I smile against him. "I'm not Anastasia Tate yet, you know."

He presses a kiss to the underside of my chin. Lower. "You have always been Anastasia Tate. The rest is just paperwork."

He pushes my dress up, and I open for him as he sinks into me, inch by inch, the heat of his cock filling me until I feel consumed by him.

"I will never get enough of you," he groans against my lips. "Never, Stasi."

My hands dig into his back, nails raking his skin as he pushes into me. I bite down on his shoulder. "More."

And as his hips move against me, as I cry out his name, I know that I will never get enough of them, either.

And we have a lifetime together to make the most of it.

46 — Stasi — one year later

I nearly bump into the tall male as I'm leaving the coffee shop. I just manage to catch my coffee before it spills, and he steadies me with an apologetic nod. Jet black eyes meet mine, and I drop my eyes down to the tattoos running over his neck.

"Enzo," a voice hisses. Turning, I move back to let the rest of his group pass me. The girl with them, petite with cropped blonde hair, leans into the man that I bumped into. He wraps his arm around his shoulder, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

And I blink, as the *other* male with her slides his arm around her waist.

And then a *third* man bursts out, his arms full. "Woah. Thanks for waiting, team."

"Shouldn't have bought the whole counter," the tattooed man counters, and the male with the baked goods… pouts.

"Zella wanted them."

The blonde twists around, making grabby hands. And the brown-haired man dips down, brushing a kiss against her lips before he hands a bag over.

She catches me unabashedly staring, and winks.

I'm so caught up in watching them that I nearly miss my phone ringing. Assuming it's my writing tutor, I flip the phone open. "I'm coming, I swear!"

Silas grunts down the phone. "Not yet. Later."

I bite my lip. "*Silas*. Although you'll never guess what I've just seen. I'll tell you later. I'll be home around four, after my lecture."

"I'll pick you up," he says instantly. "Four?"

I nod into the phone. "Love you."

His voice softens. "Enjoy your lecture."

I stroll towards campus. How different my life is now, compared to eighteen months ago.

This life… this life is perfect.

And no matter what it took to get here. I wouldn't change it.

Not a single thing.

Stalk me

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